

Enter a Child

by

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Though these sketches are far truer than not, only a few of the characters appear under their own names.

PART I

CHINESE MASKS

I STOOD, HOLDING MY NURSE'S HAND, ON the doorstep in front of the double brown doors of a house in Belgrave Square. The murky darkness of five o'clock on a November evening lay over everything. This outward dreariness was in keeping with my feelings, for I was going to a party. I detested parties, for, clinging to my nurse as my one safeguard in a confusing world, at parties I was invariably torn from her and was offered in her place a variety of things I did not want, and often definitely disliked: unfamiliar faces in unfamiliar rooms, games I didn't know how to play, food I was too disturbed to eat, or, even, I might be compelled to sit and stare at a conjuror or a ventriloquist. To account for this lack of social grip, I must explain that I had only been in the world three or four years, and so far had not really got accustomed to

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anything. The only parties I did enjoy, and these were rare, were present-giving ones, for I had few possessions, and a new toy quickened my sense of being alive. If present-giving parties were the best, conjuror and ventriloquist ones were the worst. Conjurors I disliked because, instead of keeping their distance, they had a way of coming close up to me in a jocular manner that filled me with apprehension. As, instead of looking at the conjuror, I was always twisting round in my chair to catch a glimpse of that reassuring landmark, my nurse's face at the back of the room, the entertainer's kindly meant efforts to catch my attention are understandable. I remember one conjuror in particular, an extremely large one, with eyes like friendly, far too friendly, marbles that gleamed above an ingratiating smile. At his approach everything within me shrank together. As he lowered his face so as to bring it on to a level with mine I could feel his powerful personality swamping my own minute one. However, fortunately I had discovered that if at these undesirable approaches I shut my eyes and kept them tightly screwed up for some time, when I opened them again the invader of my child

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sanctuary had generally disappeared. I now applied these tactics, and when, after a suitable interval, I ventured to look again, that unpleasing collection of features had vanished. So far, so good. But that kind of thing can hardly be called pleasure.

As for the ventriloquist's deformed doll, no fiend, either in voice or appearance, could have been more repulsive to me. For of all things as a small child that I dreaded and shrank from, the sham-human was the worst. The de Goncourts' comment on wax figures, "*je ne connais pas de mensonge de la vie plus effrayant*," exactly expresses what were my own sentiments. And for this there was sufficient reason. One Guy Fawkes Day when I, aged two, was taking the air in my perambulator, a man in a comic mask had suddenly shot round my nurse's elbow, and, shoving his distorted cardboard visage into mine, had emitted an ear-splitting yell. The shock of suddenly seeing that inhuman face nearly touching my own, accompanied by the shriek that issued from it, was appalling. It made a dent in my mind that never came out.

To sit on the nursery floor fiddling with my doll's house, enveloped in the sunshine that

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streamed through the open window while my nurse watered her yellow musk on the sill outside — this kind of brooding peace was what at that age I really enjoyed. “That’s a giant musk, that is !” my nurse would say, shaking the last drops from her water-can over her plant : and, looking up, I would see the strong yellow and vivid green that frothed over the brick pot, the petals glistening with water-drops. Insistent yellow, green, and red against the smooth blue of the sky . . . my being expanded with happiness.

“Yes, that’s a giant musk, that is !” my nurse would repeat with pride, as she rattled down the window.

“Mm . . . mm . . . !” I would croon from the floor contentedly, savouring all the grandeur of a nursery that possessed a giant musk.

Up to the age of five I lived almost entirely in my sensations and emotions, and in these I was no amateur : in fact, as regards fear I was an expert. To account for this, I must first go back to an episode in which my mother.

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then herself a small child, figured with Queen Victoria and a footman.

My old nurse had started her career as nursery-maid to the last generation of our family — and in consequence was always called by her Christian name, Mary — and one summer day she had been sent out in sole charge of my mother for a stroll in Hyde Park. As they meandered along by the flower-beds near Grosvenor Gate a carriage and pair were seen approaching, and within the carriage, sunk in one corner, Queen Victoria.

“*Look!*” cried nursery-maid to child, “there’s the Queen!”

“*The Queen! The Queen!*” shouted her charge, and, suddenly stung to an access of loyalty, she tore along by the railing, trying to keep up with the carriage, all the time shrilling, “*The Queen! The Queen!*”

Queen Victoria, no doubt fearing that this devoted subject, escaped from her nurse, might come to harm, ordered her carriage to be stopped and the footman to lead the child back to her nurse, and to ask the name of her parents. When my nurse saw that owing to her charge’s behaviour the Queen’s carriage had come to a

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standstill, when she saw the footman get down, go up to the excited child, take her by the hand and lead her back, she was agasp. To use her own words, it gave her a turn. And when, further, the footman said her Majesty wished to know the name of the little girl's parents, then, so she averred, she went queer all over. For, so she thought, the Queen, in royal anger at this interference with her afternoon drive, would avenge herself by informing the police, so that when the nursery-maid got home she would find a policeman waiting for her, helmet, uniform, and handcuffs complete. Such was my nurse's opinion of Queen Victoria and the police force. The fact that when she did reach home there was no policeman, only, to her mind, pointed to the fact that so far he had not been able to find the right house; and for months she lived in terror of his arrival.

The nursery-maid had now been head nurse for many years, and had shrunk into a little wizened old woman, but this episode with the police — if that which has never happened can be called an episode — had darkened her mind regarding the whole force. This often-repeated story naturally gave me a strange impression of

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the vindictive nature of the Royal Family, and a dread of policemen, whom I believed to be always eagerly on the look-out for any trip or slip made by the infantile occupants of Hyde Park. This was no doubt useful to my nurse but wretched for myself, giving as it did — for we lived in London — a vaguely apprehensive atmosphere to all my outdoor hours. They were also made still more apprehensive by an actual disaster that from time to time befell me. Playing about on the grass in the Park, I would suddenly find that nurse and perambulator had disappeared. For my nurse would occasionally give vent to a sadistic streak that ran through an otherwise homely, soft, and sentimental nature, and hidden behind a distant tree would feast on my display of increasing terror at believing myself to be lost. For anyone to understand the sense of anguish roused by these incidents, it must be realized that when they first began I was so small that I barely knew my own name, and certainly did not know where I lived; thus, scarcely aware as yet of my own identity, to find myself suddenly existing as a completely separate being, the support of nurse and familiar perambulator

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entirely withdrawn, naturally filled me with panic.

Indoors too my education in the horrific proceeded apace. My mind, stretching out all round me to get to know the kind of world I had entered, discovered through stories read to me, gossip, and teasing that, apart from the few home figures, it was peopled by a most sinister company : kidnappers, burglars, ghosts of many kinds, a witch who lived in the nursery bathroom, and a ' little man ' who, if I did not behave myself, would leap like an acrobat out of the chimney. I believed visitations from any of these undesirables to be not improbable, but imminent, and my general sense of insecurity increased. A final addition to the group had lately arrived. A boy-cousin called Guy, several years older than myself, who was staying with us, had one evening strolled into the night nursery where I lay in my cot. Leaning on the end of it, he said : " I'll tell you a story, a quite true story. Someone was lying in bed, just as you are, in the dark, when he suddenly heard a knocking inside a drawer in a chest-of-drawers. He listened, and then a dreadful voice, a horrible, squeaky voice,

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screamed, ‘ Let me out ! Let me out ! ’ ”

• “It’s not true? It’s not true?” I implored.

“Quite true!”

“No, no!” I protested, and beat the sheet with my fists.

He turned to go. "Absolutely true; I knew the boy it happened to myself."

There was not a night after this when left alone but I dreaded to hear that terrible voice. And often, when my parents were out, I was only too well aware that, except for the servants far away in the basement, I was completely alone in the house. To prepare me for this ordeal, my nurse, before going down to her supper, would at my earnest request present me with a handkerchief to hold in my hand, for to cling tightly to a handkerchief did, so I had discovered, give me a microscopic sense of companionship. After this she departed, leaving the door ajar. I would lie listening to her going further and further down the stairs . . . there was her step now on the tiled floor of the hall . . . the opening of the door leading to the basement stairs, and now the distant closing click as she shut the door. How dreadful to me was that soft far-off click that told me I was

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now absolutely alone. Instantly to my stretched imagination a peculiar, a special kind of silence spread through the house: a silence that pressed into the room, that impregnated the feather-dark in the midst of which I lay acutely aware of being the one living thing in the heart of a house that had become, except for the light on my landing, one huge box of darkness; horribly aware, too, of my own smallness compared with the powers, earthly and ghostly, that might now manifest at any moment. Against these the handkerchief gripped in my hand, the lesser blackness in one corner of the room that reassured me as to the light on the landing — this my nurse's final *gage d'amour* — were my only, my most frail comforters. I would lie on my back, not daring to stir a finger for fear of attracting 'their' attention. Instinct told me that in rigid immobility lay my only chance of safety. But if my body was still, my mind was taut . . . taut . . . ears on the strain to catch the faintest, tiniest sound. I had to keep this aural watch in every direction at once: on door and window for entrance of kidnapper or burglar; on the hearthrug for the arrival of the 'little man'; on all the cup-

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boards and drawers for premonitory movement or squeak from the Unknown Horror. Nor was this all. Ghosts might materialize at any moment anywhere. If the wind stirred behind blind or curtain, the thump, thump of my heart was like running footsteps inside my body — *but were they inside me or were they steps running across the room?* I gripped my handkerchief still tighter. . . And now . . . a sound from the bathroom . . . yes, surely a sound . . . something moving . . . something creeping . . . something coming up the stairs. And if it really *was* something, what could I do? I knew that however loudly I shouted the servants shut up in the basement could not possibly hear me. No one would hear me. Once I thought that I would try to encourage myself by singing a hymn I had been taught. I tried. I heard a thin, wobbly voice venturing forth into that blanket of dark . . . one line, and the voice petered to silence. . . . No, no, it wasn't safe . . . when I was singing I couldn't listen. . . . perhaps even while I sang *something* had got close up to me . . . was perhaps leaning over my bed. . . . Tears of fear were running down my face: I would have

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liked to wipe them off, but no, I mustn't move . . . I mustn't stir . . . now again, listen . . . listen. . . .

And as for gusty nights when the long chintz window-curtains would suddenly shake and swell out into the room, struggling at their moorings, then it was like women in huge billowing skirts rushing across the room . . . rushing altogether, from one side to another . . . huge women . . . witch-women . . . oh, was it women or was it only the curtains? Often I would find that though, after my bath, I had gone to bed quite dry I was now unaccountably wet. This surprised but did not disturb me.

And then, at last, I would hear the one sound that through what had seemed to me a whole night I had craved to hear — the sound of the basement-door being opened again. Before this, there would have been from time to time false hopes raised; but this time . . . yes . . . it really was what I hoped for — the servants coming up from supper. No voice of seraph could have been more lovely to me than were those rising, those ever drawing nearer sounds of the servants mounting the

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stairs on their way to bed: the creaking banister, the low continuous chattering, the heavy breathing, the oh's and ah's of some exhausted pilgrim on reaching one of the landings. My tortured vigil was over! Now that angelic group was actually on the landing outside.

"Mary, will you come? Please, *please* come."

"Coming in a minute."

Coming in a minute! All Heaven in flower.

2

Such so far had been the headlines of my short existence; the headlines because these, the terrors of those infant days, still remain clearly in my mind when nearly everything else has faded out.

So now, aged five, I stood on the doorstep of the WYSTONS' house, holding on to my old nurse's hand, waiting to be admitted to a tea-party which, little as I guessed it, was to contain some features so peculiar that it was to remain imprinted on my mind for life. The WYSTONS

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were a large family of brothers and sisters, the elder ones already grown up, and even the two youngest, Marcella and Oliver, who were to be my hosts, a good deal older than I was, being schoolroom and not nursery children. This was my first visit to their house.

My nurse rang the bell. A footman opened the doors, and Mary led me into the hall. At the back stood the butler, who, after explaining the way to the schoolroom, asked us to please walk up, and he and the footman disappeared through a baize door. Silence closed round us. The light was subdued, the Turkey carpet thick, massive pieces of furniture loomed darkly. As my nurse and I reached the further hall my eye fell on a life-sized figure in a suit of armour standing near the foot of the stairs. That motionless, watchful figure, those fixed, glassy eyes, lent a sinister aspect to this sombre place which was not at all to my liking.

"*Is he real?*" I whispered.

"Touch him and see!" urged Mary, with her old-Nanny giggle.

Touch him and see! I clasped her hand tighter, and in silence we set ourselves to climb the stairs. Half-way up we turned off through

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a door, and rich gloom and thick carpets were exchanged for the steep stone steps, the white-washed walls of the back-stairs. We reached the top, we turned down a long passage, and my nurse stopped at a door. She knocked. "*Entrez !*" shouted a gay voice, and the door was flung wide. The room was filled with light and people ; in the grate a fire cosily roared ; a table covered with plates of cakes gleamed white beneath a hanging electric light ; a jiggetty tune was being struck off the piano. My hosts greeted me vociferously. "*Here you are !*" they cried, almost tearing my coat off me. Having as a rule experienced a sense of isolation at parties, I found this ardour surprisingly pleasant. My timorous spirit gave a little skip. The piano-player twirled round on his stool, and to my surprise I saw it was Guy. I say to my surprise, for it was the first time I had met a familiar face at a party, and as I had always met unfamiliar ones I therefore imagined I always should. Guy was four or five years older than myself and, as I discovered later, was a close friend of the WYSTONS. He had a pinkish face, with fawn, monkey eyes, and this monkey quality ran all through him. "He's a

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one is Master Guy, he is ! ” the nurses would say in a kind of nervous admiration, not knowing who would be his next victim. He now tossed me a rather patronizing “Hullo, Dolly ! ” and whirling round again on his stool, continued his strumming. A child a little bigger than myself stood watching him intently. This child, who, I found, was called Delia, was an enchanting creature : gaiety seemed positively to spirtle from her. At the merest word, or even sound, her little radiant face turned here, turned there, as if delighted at being given yet something more to smile at.

Oliver Wynton had seized my hat and, balancing it on his head, was doing a shuffling dance in and out of the furniture. Beneath his crisp schoolboy hair beamed a face over which quizzical impertinence ran like quicksilver. He had a blue-eyed stare which he knew how to make, and generally did make, embarrassing to anyone who came within its range, and an entrancing voice that curled and pirouetted in the air. At the end of any remark he made, his eyes always slid over to Marcella as if there were some hidden understanding between them. This hidden understanding, from which

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I was shut out, held a fascination for me: I learnt to watch for that sidelong glance, for though on this, my first visit to the Wystons', my impressions of Oliver and Marcella were blurred, I was often to go again, and everything about them became as clearly known to me, as unforgettable as two intaglios cut in my mind. Especially was this so with Oliver, for he wore his boyhood with a flourish. I had never met a child who so scintillated, who so held my attention; but in my woolly five-year-old way, though I could receive impressions I did not the least know how to adjust myself to them, therefore contact with him was, to me, like coming up against the blade of a knife. I had already known people I disliked, people I dreaded, but here was a new experience, a boy before whom I felt embarrassed and, in some odd way, ashamed. Simply by being intensely himself, he gave me my first dim idea that my own shyness and timidity were contemptible: his rippling glance had only to fall in my direction for me to feel that it would be an improvement if I were different from what I was. The memory of him lies, across that period of my life like a shaft of

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brilliant but painful light.

Marcella was tall and thin, and so fair that her flickering lashes looked almost white. Cleverness was wedged within her small, watchful face, and this made part of her supercilious charm. Now and then for a second her indifferent glance registered the fact that I existed, but further than this the relationship between child-hostess and infant-guest did not go. So far life had lit no fires in me, but both the WYSTONS were well alight. With Oliver the flames were visible: he was aflicker all over. But Marcella's fires were banked up within: their gathered intensity made no outward show.

As for my own appearance, my hair, thick, brown, and short, was cut straight across my forehead and hung down each side, and out of this three-sided square my face looked out: a round face on which, so far, no writing had appeared. My three-foot body was as slight as it was flexible. Such was the small hut in which my spirit lived.

When my nurse and I had come into the room, three other nurses got up from their seats by the fire, one of them making herself

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known to us as Mrs. Roper, the WYSTONS' old nurse who, though her charges were well out of the nursery, presided at schoolroom tea. Against the chair of one of the other nurses leant a small, plump boy in a sailor suit. His name, so I discovered, was TWINKLES, though nothing could have been less appropriate, so solid and slow was he. His pondering gaze was at the moment fixed on a plate of chocolate cakes on the table, and at intervals, pointing with a fat finger, he slowly counted them under his breath. I knew what he was doing, for I had often done it myself. He was seeing if they would go round. He, Delia, Guy, and myself made up the party.

But now the door-handle was turned, the door was noisily knocked open by the corner of a tea-tray, and the nursery-maid who carried it entered triumphantly. "Here it is!" she exclaimed, setting down the tea-pot so energetically that it spilled over. We all sat down round the table, and tea began, silent except for sibilant murmurs from the nurses as, with tense party politeness, they passed and re-passed cups of tea and glasses of milk. The meal went on, but the silence continued, punctuated at

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intervals only by a suppressed gurgle of laughter from Oliver, who seemed to find either in us or in his own thoughts something irrepressibly amusing. The bread-and-butter stage had been passed, and Twinkles was taking large, slow bites into his chocolate cake, when suddenly Marcella got up from her chair, and went over to another table on which lay an open paint-box and a tumbler of messy paint-water. She picked up this tumbler, and going up to Twinkles, with one hand pulled his sailor collar away from his neck, and with the other tipped the dirty water down his back. Twinkles hurled his cake across the table — an action that even in the excitement of the moment struck me as extraordinary — and an indescribable sound, a mixture of gasp, choke, and squeal, burst from him, while, squirming in his chair, he tried to grasp his sopping back : then, falling forward on to the table — upsetting his tea, which streamed steaming and unheeded along the cloth — he burst into bitter sobbing. The nurses' first exclamations of surprise turned into words. "Now really, Miss Marcella, now really you hadn't ought!" protested Mrs. Roper.

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“You’re a wicked, naughty young lady, that’s what I say !” exclaimed Twinkles’ nurse, going red in the face, as she got up and came round to her charge, “and I hope them as has more to do with you than I have will say what they think !” And with this she snatched hold of Twinkles’ arm, in the turmoil of her mind her anger with Marcella finding vent in her movements, so that Twinkles, pulled to the ground with such roughness, redoubled his sobs. Gathering him up in her arms, she left the room, Mrs. Roper hurrying after them.

Marcella, making no comment, sat down again, and stretched an arm for the jam. Oliver, his hands over his face, was convulsed. The contented little smile on Delia’s face, though still there, was tinged with puzzlement as she looked at now one, now another of the actors in this unaccountable scene. As for me, my infant mind was in a whirl. Twinkles had been doing nothing wrong : then why had he been punished ? There was something going on around me that I could not understand. The reassurance I had felt from my gay welcome began to waver, and must have shown in my face, for Guy cried : “Cheer up ! Here,

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have something to eat. Have a scone ! ” And in spite of my protests, for I had quite finished, he popped one on to my plate. “ Have a bun ! ” And he tipped the remaining one on to the scone. “ Have a cake ! ” And a rock cake followed the scone and the bun. Trained always to eat what was put on my plate, embarrassment rose within me. But my nurse spoke up. “ Don’t you eat it, Miss Dolly; he’s only joking.”

“ Oh, *am* I ? ” he said menacingly, and began gulping down his tea.

“ *Everyone finished ?* ” cried Oliver, and taking me by the waist, plumped me on the ground. All the others got up.

“ Now then, Dolly,” said Guy, “ I’m going to give you a present ; I know you like presents.”

“ Oh yes ! ” Then this was going to be a nice party after all ! The oddness of a fellow-guest offering me a present did not strike me.

“ Very well then, shut your eyes and count twelve out loud, and then I’ll give it you.”

I was used to these curious rites before the giving of presents, they were all in the best

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tradition. I shut my eyes and counted. As I reached twelve : "Don't look, but put your arms out," said Guy, "it's heavy." A large present then ! They were generally the nicest.

I felt long bars of something cold laid across my arms, something so heavy that, unless Guy had kept his hands beneath, it would have fallen.

"Now look !" he cried.

I opened my eyes. Across my arms lay the schoolroom steel tongs. Guy took his hand away, and one end of the tongs went down with a bang, while I remained clinging to the other. My disappointment was only equalled by my confusion. The rules of present-receiving were rigid. *Always* one must say 'thank you' and appear pleased, however little one liked the present. Already several times in my life I had been given useful things : a work-box, an embroidered frock, a pair of red shoes : was this only another of that kind of dreary present ? To be used perhaps for the nursery fire . . . ? And yet . . . there was something about it. . . .

"Say thank you !" said my nurse, with an odd smile.

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Then it *was*. . . .

"Thank you very much, Guy," I said politely.

Never had I seen anyone laugh so much : he flung himself down on the sofa, he rolled, he writhed, he shook his handkerchief in the air. Oliver, leaning over the back of the chair on which he straddled, gazed fixedly at me with the queerest expression on his face. "Oh Lord !" he groaned, "Oh Lord !"

"No swearing, *please*," said Mrs. Roper, picking up the tongs, and putting them back in the grate.

Oliver leapt up. "Here, Delia darling," he called, "come over here ; we've something to tell you. Come along, Guy — you too."

Marcella joined them in their corner, and they all whispered together. Then, "We'll be back in a minute," cried the three elder ones, and all scimmaged through the door. Delia and I were left behind. Mrs. Roper had come back into the room, but neither then nor later did Twinkles reappear. Such as had been his rôle in the social scene, insignificant, and finally disastrous, it was over. He had played his part and gone.

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“*Faugh!*” said Mrs. Roper, fanning herself with her apron, “it seems to me very hot in here! Could you bear a little window open, Mrs. Moores?”

“It’ud be very nice,” said my nurse.

As the window was opened a barrel organ struck up. The whirly-twirly tune curveted into the room. “*Oh!*” cried Delia, and began to swing and prance to the music: as she pranced she laughed, her curls flew, she clapped her hands. She was gay as a butterfly. Catching her spirit, I too began to whirl and to twirl. To myself, an over-disciplined child to whom even a misplaced laugh or sneeze was accounted for sin, abandon of this sort was unknown. Now, the barrel organ tune somersaulting in the air, Delia’s excitement, my own capers, gave release to something within me which it was wholly delightful to give release to. But at the height of this infant bacchanal the door shot open and, for a moment, so aghast was I by what I saw, that I stood transfixed. Within the doorway our two hosts and Guy stood fantastically posed before us, Oriental shawls and kimonos thrown about them, their faces hidden behind Chinese masks of the most

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revolting description, strange and leering, at once human and inhuman : their very colour too, a peculiar all-over pink, increasing their uncanniness. As the three stood there, they moved and squeaked, twisting themselves into peculiar attitudes, stretching out long arms menacingly. I flew to my nurse : clutched her arm with all my force. But Guy was upon me. "No shirking ! You've got to play !" he cried, and dragged me from the room. The other children followed. As we got outside Guy locked the door. "You see that ?" he asked, holding up the key, "no running back to Mary !" The passages, usually brightly lit, now had only a low glimmer. The bedrooms along each side, their doors standing open, were pits of darkness.

The hour that followed remains in my mind as a dark confusion of terror, a tortured memory that even now throws a baleful shadow ; a memory of being perpetually hunted along shadowy passages, chivied in and out of pitchy bedrooms by those, to me, completely terrifying figures. I screamed and I ran, I ran and I screamed. Once I tripped in the passage, fell with a bang and hit my forehead. I was up in

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a second, feeling the blood trickling warm down my cheek. But what were bumps and blood to me at that moment? . . . There came a time when I found myself alone close to the schoolroom door. I thumped on it. "Mary!" I hiccuped, "Let me in, let me in!" On the other side of the door I heard the nurses' cheerful voices rising high above the clatter of coals being shovelled on to the fire. "Mary . . ." I began again, but at that instant a yelling figure swept down on me.

Looking back on that lurid evening, I exonerate the WYSTONS from any intention of bullying. They had got their masks, and had seized on this tea-party as an excuse for using them. They were not at that age when one considers other people's point of view, and, if they could have been brought to the point of considering mine, they would probably have said, and have thought, that it would do such a soppy child good to be gingered up a bit.

The hideous evening went on. Towards the end of it I noticed a flicker of light within one of the bedrooms. It struck me I might hide there from my tormentors. I crept in. The light came from the fire, which must have

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just been made up, and its gay flare gave a dancing snugness to the room. The double beds, the room's draped appearance, and its generally grand air so reminded me of my mother's room that I instinctively knew this must be Lady Wynton's. Where should I hide? I lifted the bed valance, and saw there was just room for me to creep in. On hands and knees I managed it. Once in, it was all dark, but there was a comforting glow between the edge of valance and carpet. As I crouched there I became gradually aware of the uncomfortable feel of my clothes which had got all awry, aware of the toes of my left foot which I had stubbed against a chair, of the still bleeding bruise on my forehead. I had just gingerly felt this bruised place, and was licking the blood off my finger, when I heard Guy's voice in the passage: "But where has she got to? She must be *somewhere*!" My ribs swelled with the effort to hold my breath. Surely, right under the bed I was safe! But no. The valance was lifted just in front of me. "Ha-ha!" said a voice. A hand gripped my shoulder. I was dragged out, "I've got you!" cried Guy, "now you must come to

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my cave ! ” He ran me out of the room, kicked open a door, and dragged me into a cupboard where we bumped against water-cans and brooms. He crouched over me. “ Gr . . . rr . ? . rr . ? . rr ! ” he mouthed, and made a pretence of clawing at me. An instinct leapt within me. I bit his hand. “ Why ! you’ve *bitten* me ! ” he yelped. “ Oh ! you naughty little girl ! Now I shall kill you ! ”

I thought he really meant it. I remember listening, without realizing they were my own, to more distraught shriekings than any I had yet heard in my five years. Suddenly the cupboard door was wrenched open, and an old lady’s-maid seized me and dragged me out. My nurse came scurrying. I hurled myself at her. “ *No, no, no !* ” I shrieked, ramming my face into her skirt. “ *No, no, no !* ”

“ Here, put her on the sofa,” said the maid, and picking up my screaming person carried me back into the bedroom, “ they’ve driven her half crazy, poor little dear.”

Guy and my hosts had vanished. Blessed absence ! Blessed presence of these reassuring, cosy old women.

“ Now what about her having a nice cup

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o' tea, or a glass of hot milk,
went on my rescuer.

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." I wailed between my hiccups, not so much as a refusal of milk or tea in particular as in general protest against my nightmare experiences.

“She’s not big enough to play with them, that’s the truth,” chattered on the maid; “let’s have a little more light, that’ll be more cheerful.” And she turned on a little lamp that stood on a table close by. As the lamp sprang into glow an entrancing object standing just beneath it caught my eye: a large mauve flower in a glass vase. The glinting glass and water, the flower itself with its fantastic shape, its fringed purple-spotted petals, its whole airy fragility poised on the spray of maidenhair that spread its green filigree beneath, seemed to open the door on to another world, a world the very opposite to that world of macabre horror into which I had just received my initiation.

The maid noticed my absorption: "You like that, don't you?" she smiled.

"She's a one for flowers!" put forth my nurse proudly.

Perhaps she was thinking of what she called

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her 'flower peep-shows.' When Mary made me a flower peep-show my heart turned over with happiness. She would cut a little door in a sheet of notepaper, and then fold the paper so as to make a sort of flat case. When she gave one the completed peep-show, one opened the little paper door, and there, beneath it, would be revealed a flower mosaic of leaves and petals all pressed together. This glimpse of a sylvan world suddenly brought to view beneath the prosaic exterior of a piece of notepaper gave one the happiest sensation. I cannot help wondering if originally these flowery conceits used to be given as country valentines, a Corydon's gift to his Phyllis when he had not the money to buy her the real thing at the shop. This seems to me very probable, and, if so, it adds another touch of charm to my memory of Mary's flower baubles.

But I left myself lying on Lady Wynton's sofa, and my nurse exclaiming that "I was a one for flowers."

"Here! let her have it, poor little soul," exclaimed the maid, "after what she's been through and all!" and lifting flower and fern from the vase, she put them in my hands. My

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fingers closed round their cool, wet stems. Even the little drip of water that came with them was dear to me.

“But what will her Ladyship say!” ejaculated my nurse.

“Oh! she won’t mind,” said the maid comfortably, “she’s that kind.”

The mention of Lady Wyston brought me back from the world of the mauve flower into all the horrid realities of the present. Though during the last few moments the visit had taken an unlooked-for turn for the better, we were still in the centre of hostility, danger lurked in every room, down every passage of that house. There were still the good-byes to be said — for I hoped we had at least got to the point when we could say good-bye — there was still that sinister figure to be passed again in the hall.

“Feeling better now?” queried the maid, her old parchment face ashine with kindness.

I nodded. I was lifted off the sofa, and we set off down the passage. The maid opened the schoolroom door. A burst of derisive welcome greeted us. “Oh, I say,” cried Oliver, his golden voice on the dance, “Oh, I say, that’s Mother’s orchid you’ve got!”

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"Now, Master Oliver," said the maid, with sudden sharpness, "*that's enough!*"

He turned away with a grin. I was aware of a protective atmosphere that had risen around me. I knew that now the nurses and maid were, in child-language, all on my side. Delia had listened to this sparring with her usual seraphic smile, and gave the impression of having enjoyed her evening thoroughly. That which to me had been scarifying had passed over her leaving no mark. Our hosts had taken off their masks and were mopping their perspiring faces. Oliver flung himself down on his back on the sofa and began twirling his mask round and round on the point of his finger. "Behold! behold!" he cried, striking at it so as to make it whirl faster and faster. "Behold! behold!" fluted his voice. But the mask lost its balance and fell. "Ah! behold!" he exclaimed and, ignoring it completely, thrust his hands behind his head and lay smiling up into the blare of light from the ceiling.

There ensued one of those well-known pauses at children's parties, especially at small parties. A pause when everything seems

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suddenly to come to a standstill : when no one knows what to do next : when, after a silence, voices say : “ Well . . . what *shall* we do ? ”

The pause now was a long one.

“ *Well . . . !* ” said Mrs. Roper at last.

“ *Well . . . !* ” said Mary.

Then Delia's nurse remarked suddenly : “ Now, Miss Delia, we ought to be going,” and began to shove her into her coat. The elder children all rushed out into the passage to see her off. I too was helped into coat and hat. My nurse pressed on me suitable expressions of farewell and gratitude to Mrs. Roper and the lady's-maid, which I passed on to them automatically, and we turned to go. At the end of the passage we found the WYSTONS and GUY doing gymnastics on a big coal-box that stood at the head of the stairs. “ Good-bye, good-bye,” they shouted casually, scarcely looking at us as they vaulted on and off the box. But as my nurse and I started to go downstairs Oliver left the others and pranced up to the banister. His entrancing face, mirthful and cruel, peered down at us over the rail. “ *Come again soon !* ” he jeered. His words, charged with contempt, so pierced me that they have

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lain in my ear ever since. They might have been spoken this moment. But intonations of meaning were lost on my nurse. To her mind a polite party formula had been expressed, and the social code demanded an equally polite rejoinder. She pressed my hand: "Say how much you've enjoyed yourself," she whispered.

But Oliver's remark had awakened a part of my mind that had before been dormant. For the first time I was conscious of being an object of derision. Immersed in this infinitely disagreeable sensation, I said nothing.

3

Both my parents considered the past in every way superior to the present — their own present, which, in its turn, has now become part of the past. Consequently they believed the way in which they had been brought up was the ideal method for the upbringing of the young, and without entering further into the matter they proceeded to apply this system to me. In fact, my mother's own upbringing had been so old-fashioned that I may say I was,

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practically, brought up according to the ideas of two generations before my own. These ideas did not make for the cheerfulness of the young. Compared to the flower-strewn lives of the children of to-day my own childhood was incredibly dreary. The basic principles were that I should always experience an overwhelming sense of respect and gratitude towards my parents, and should be prevented from inconveniencing them more than was unavoidable.

Those who ask don't get :

Those who don't ask don't want.

This succinct saying was constantly handed out to me by my father with grim satisfaction, and the sense of hopelessness, of flat defeat it engendered in my mind may be said to have been the keynote of my early days. When friends of my parents would sometimes remark on my good fortune in being a child, and tell me I was now at the happiest time of my life, I would wonder what they meant, and, in my mind examining the path of my monotonous existence, I would try to discover that glamour which was visible to them but not to me. Every

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day I was met with precept, admonition, repression, but O the hobbyhorse was forgotten: that hobbyhorse of gaiety on which every child needs to be mounted if it is successfully to withstand the first buffets of life.

This puritancial attitude was an inheritance from our Scotch ancestors. Looking through family photographs of the past I can see this outlook imprinted on the faces of the successive generations. As I write, there lies before me one of these photographs, a conversation picture of a party of young things in a boat on a lake: a picture of the 'seventies. Across the garden there faintly gleams the façade of a large country-house. It is a day of late spring, the trees are thick-feathered with leaves, and plumes of light dip their reflections down into the mirror of the lake. It is clear that the grass bank up to which the boat is drawn is of vivid greenness, that the sky is tranquil May blue, and the bushes full of the soft din of birds. All is airily gay, except, surprisingly enough, the expression on the faces of the young women and the young men grouped about in their light dresses and white duck suits. Not only 'the time is out of joint,' but 'I was born to

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set it right' is pompously engraved on those young faces beneath their forward-tilted spring hats. One longs to implore them not to go on spoiling what would otherwise be a most endearing picture by such portentous gravity, by this absurd idea that they are going to help the world simply by looking glum. One feels constrained to leap into their boat, Montaigne in hand, and lighten their tension by his enchanting phrases on true philosophy: "*On a grand tort de la peindre . . . d'un visage renfrogné, sourcilleux et terrible. . . . Il n'est rien plus gai, plus gaillard, plus enjoué, et à peu que je ne die folâtre : elle ne prêche que fête et bon temps : une mine triste et transie montre que ce n'est pas là son gîte.*"

In the holidays, especially during the summer holidays, the mists that lay over my path definitely lifted, but, in all, the holidays only covered thirteen or fourteen weeks out of the fifty-two, and, once over, it was extraordinary how completely they fell from my mind. Neither as remembered nor as future happiness did they have any effect on my outlook. The

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present was all-insistent. My parents had not the slightest intention of making my life miserable; no parents could have been better-intentioned, but they were obsessed by the idea of doing their duty by me, and seeing that I did mine by them. The question: "Is this child happy or unhappy?" would never have occurred to them. Neither would they ever have thought of applying such a question to themselves. Their minds simply did not work that way. They saw life in terms of necessity, duty, and convention, and if I had been capable of summing up in words the unsatisfactoriness of my days, they would merely have been genuinely shocked at such a reaction to their parental goodness.

My father was one of the major problems of my life. A problem in the sense that I was always making little bids to enter into friendly relations with him, which little bids were invariably repulsed. One of these occurred when I was about three or four. My father's birthday was imminent, and I had just discovered that on birthdays' presents were expected, even by fathers. I determined to give mine one. Having no money, I had to make

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my present, and I set to work without delay. I managed to get hold of several sheets of illustrations of ornamental garden-bowls out of some catalogue, and proceeded to paint them in as bright colours as possible. • My system of painting was first to ram the paint brush with all my force down on top of the paint, and then to twist the brush this way and that. I then pressed the brush with equal force on top of the drawing, splurged it round, and would note with satisfaction a spatter of paint arrive, more or less, on the object I wished to colour. With these bowls I was now painting I did not of course expect the colours to keep within the contours of the bowls: the paint had to go anywhere it could be persuaded to go. It took me several days to paint as many bowls as I thought necessary to make up a present, but finally I accomplished three gaily daubed sheets. There remained the cutting out. If to paint was difficult, to cut out was infinitely more so. In the first place, there was the difficulty of holding the scissors at all, then of getting them into position to bite the paper, then of manœuvring this bite so that it came somewhere near where one wished it to come, and,

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finally, of forcing the scissors' jaws open again — this necessitating a two-handed struggle. Several more days passed in earnest labour, and then, with a sense of triumph, I surveyed my completed present lying on the nursery table before me. *I have made it myself*, I thought, and knew for the first time the elation of him who has created. Naturally, in cutting out the bowls I hadn't been able to keep to their outline any more than in colouring them, but this seemed to me quite immaterial. In my eyes, my present was not only an adequate, but a beautiful, a remarkable present. For the two days that still remained before my father's birthday the secret of these coloured bowls was like a point of light in my mind round which my excited thoughts hovered.

The birthday-morning came. I had just got to the time when I was allowed to go downstairs alone, and clasping my slips of paper tightly in one hand I clung to the banister with the other, and laboriously made the long descent from nursery to dining-room. This lay at the end of a corridor lit by a skylight. This ceiling-lighting always momentarily stroked one with cheerfulness as one passed

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beneath it, and this morning the brightness of the corridor answered the brightness within me. Intense quiet and circumspection were necessary in any dealings with my father, and these I carefully observed as I opened the dining-room door and made my way across the room. Breakfast was still on the table, and, though my mother had gone, my father was there in his place, reading the paper. He took no notice of my entrance, and this pleased me, for it gave me time to arrange my present. By the side of his plate was a bare space, and on this space I laid my little discs, pushing them apart from each other to display their colours and variety. All was ready. One of my father's slogans was : *Speak out, don't mumble*, so now, endeavouring in no way to tarnish the occasion, I said with great clearness : " Many happy returns of the day, Father. I've brought you a present ! "

Without putting down his paper, he turned his head and glanced down at the untidy little deposit at his elbow : then, without speaking, turned his head back to his paper and went on reading. I could not believe that nothing more than this was going to happen. I stood there

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waiting. The clock ticked, the breakfast things lay glistening in the strong morning light, my father continued to read. It was driven in on me that the Great Moment had come, had passed. No more notice was going to be taken of my present: my father had not accepted it and was not going to: he did not think it even worth a thank-you. With fumbling fingers I scabbled up the bits of paper and made for the door. Once outside, I came to a standstill. The black-and-white-tiled corridor stretched before me cheerful as ever. Beyond it lay a few broad steps leading down to the hall . . . through the front door came the intermittent street sounds of early morning. A passing boy suddenly whistled so shrilly that it sounded as if he were inside the house. But a movement in the dining-room warned me that my father was coming out. I must not be found here. As softly, as quickly as I could, at my infantile run, I fled his presence.

This slight incident, one chosen from many, shows that the relationship between my father and myself was not ideal. His great principle as a parent was, not friendship, but discipline. He had in fact a craving for discipline that was

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so strong as often to obscure his other, most excellent, qualities, and he could not resist bending all his energies on this child-fly that happened to be myself. I give him the credit for believing that he always behaved exactly as a father should behave. Actually, as later events were to prove, he had my welfare at heart far more than many more easy-going parents, but, meantime, across nursery and schoolroom lay the shadow of Sparta.

During term-time, and term-time naturally covered the greater part of the year, I spent nearly all day shut up with my governess in a little back-room. This forced incarceration of middle-age and childhood was a dreary affair for both. That confined, sunless room was soaked in boredom. My contribution to lessons was inattention and tears: my governess's, heroic patience, breaking at moments into exasperation. In the window my bullfinch, he alone perennially cheerful, made his cage swing as he hopped from perch to perch. The sound of his beak nibbling into his lump of sugar, or being briskly sharpened

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against one of these perches ; the juicy plumpness of two hyacinths that my governess arrived with one morning and placed near the inkpot in a tumbler of water — these things alone in the room spoke to me of some vaguely apprehended good towards which my spirit stretched out. These were life : lesson-books, death. Hence my contempt for the written word : hence my inattention. Into my mind, shut as a box, my succession of governesses attempted to force information. The idea of coaxing the box to open before trying to fill it did not occur to them. My intelligence was raped instead of being wooed : it being taken for granted that my attention was there waiting to be given something to attend to. Actually, I did not even know how to attend. Two out of these nine much-to-be-pitied governesses, Miss Fancourt and Miss Thorpe, might have stirred my stupor into life, but Miss Fancourt left too soon, and Miss Thorpe came too late.

In London I had no companions of my own age either to work or to play with, and though I ached with longing for a dog, that my father would not allow. To assuage what gradually became a craving I invented an imaginary dog

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which I used to pretend went everywhere with me about the house. I used to think out things I could do that would make this home-made dog seem more real: holding the door open after I had gone through myself, for instance, so that my unseen dog could follow. I found that this particular trick helped the illusion almost more than anything.

On my birthday I had a holiday, a present, and a birthday cake. Otherwise the day was left a blank to fill in as best I could. Having no friends to invite, I used to give a peculiar sort of entertainment to the maid-servants that took place between tea and dinner. I had, I suppose, got the idea from the school-treat which my uncle gave every year at his home in the country, an occasion that was to me the very anteroom of Heaven. Naturally, in my small schoolroom the servants' 'treat' was a most compressed affair, but I would devise competitions for them that consisted in such peculiar displays of skill as throwing a ball into a hole made in a box, or pinning a tail, blindfold, on to a pictured donkey. To begin with, prizes were given to the most successful competitors, but, finally, to everyone indiscriminately ;

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these prizes being little rickety objects made by myself, and composed chiefly of cardboard and glue.

My guests always behaved splendidly, entering with gusto into every competition, however puerile, and giving the impression that the whole entertainment was wonderful. In fact that could always be said of this party which, once grown up, one can never predict of any party, whether given or received, that it was certain to be a success—a success, that is to say, as far as I was concerned. I can only hope that those kind-hearted servants experienced even a modicum of the pleasure that I did myself. Finally, my guests, having received with every sign of appreciation and gratitude each her own portion of cardboard and glue, gave me wringing shakes of the hand, and departed.

4

One winter, a year or two after the tea-party, I was sent away into the country for a week or two, not with my nurse, but with my mother's maid, Edmunds. I say, not with my

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nurse, as this was the first occasion in my life I had not been with her. All the time I was away I kept thinking of the moment that would reunite us in what to me had been a lifelong partnership.

The day came when Edmunds and I arrived back home. I was taken into the drawing-room to see my mother. There had been no Mary in the hall to greet us, neither when we got to the nursery floor was she there. I was puzzled, but when I put questions to Edmunds I received reassuring, if slightly vague answers. "Oh! that's all right!" "Now, I'll see about your tea — don't you worry." I had my tea, and I didn't worry. The meal over, Edmunds went out. I knew my mother would be closeted as usual at this hour in the drawing-room reading over the fire, but I wanted to stay upstairs to see Mary the moment she arrived. I trotted about, expecting every minute to see that little familiar form toiling up the stairs. But time passed and there was no Mary. I started to clean out my bullfinch's cage. I finished cleaning it out. Still no Mary. It was two hours since Edmunds and I had got home. Odd that Mary should be so slow in coming!

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I would ask my mother about it. I ran down to the drawing-room and opened the door. There was my mother reading by a little lamp, her small, neat toes perked up on the fender. She turned her head, and her gentle gaze took me in.

“ Well, dear ? ” she said.

I began my questioning. Why wasn't Mary here ? How *soon* would she be here ? Her answers were kind, but curiously like Edmunds's in their vagueness. Finally she asked me if I would like a game of Happy Families. This offer to play a game with me was a great concession. No thank you very much, I did not feel like a game of Happy Families. And I again started on my questioning. “ Please, *please* tell me about Mary . . . *when* will she be here ? To-night ? To-morrow ? ” Again evasive answers. But a thought struck me. Ellen, the housemaid, was Mary's great friend. She would tell me. In half an hour or so Ellen would be coming upstairs with the hot-water cans, but I couldn't wait for that. I must go and find her at once. I ran out of the drawing-room, down into the hall, and opened the door, that led to the basement. Whereas the house

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from the hall upwards was half dark, soaked in evening quiet, now, as I ran down the kitchen stairs, each step immersed me further in a blare of light and noise, the below-stairs seething preparations for dinner. As I neared the bottom I saw Ellen passing by. I seized on her. "Ellen, where's Mary? When is she coming? I want her."

Ellen's face beneath the glare of the naked electric bulb above her took on that special look of someone who has stirring news to impart. "Why, *don't you know*, Miss Dolly? She's never coming back! She's gone for good, she has!"

For a second I seemed to see Ellen's face transfixed before me. Something was swelling inside me . . . some hideous realization of grief coming to birth . . . straining against my ribs . . . suffocating me. . . .

"*Can I pass, please?*" said the kitchen-maid testily, pushing by, holding a dish. This continuance of kitchen-life pursuing its way so indifferently at such a moment gave the final touch to my sense of desolation. Turning, I made a rush for the stairs. I heard Ellen calling after me, but I tore on through the

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hall door : up through the silent house : . . .
up . . . up. . . . Edmunds, putting out my
mother's evening-dress in her room, saw me
through the open door as I fled by. " Well, I
never ! *You* seem in a hurry ! " she remarked
facetiously as the banister shook to my passing.
Up I tore . . . past the schoolroom, the bath-
room. The thought, *it could not happen*, with
the knowledge, *it has happened*, made an agonized
tightness in my mind, a dagger-point that was
pressing further and further into my wound
of grief. Up again, past what had been the
nursery, up to the room at the top of the house
where for the last year Mary had slept. I turned
the handle and stumbled in. The little, shut-up
room, clammily cold, received me into its
darkness. Groping my way across I found the
bed, and throwing myself on it face downwards
felt the soggy honeycomb texture of the cover-
let pressing against my cheek. I knew it at once
as Mary's old bed-coverlet that she had always
used as long as I could remember. Now it
seemed the one part of her that was left to me.
Dragging up a wodge of the stuff into my arms
I buried my face in it, and my anguish broke
forth.

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5

It was the winter after my nurse had gone, and I was now eight years old.

My mother's sister, Aunt Flora, was staying with us, and Aunt Flora, of gayer temperament than my mother, liked going out. In consequence, often between tea and dinner I found myself, except for the servants, left alone in the house, for my governess left at five o'clock, and this dark hour was the going-out time for my mother's maid. I endured these solitary hours quietly enough for a time, and then, quite suddenly, I took fright at finding myself the sole inhabitant of so many empty rooms. I could not explain to anyone, nor even to myself, why I minded. All I could do was to protest ; and protest I did. When I saw my mother and aunt making preparations for their fatal departure I would run from one to the other, and with streaming eyes implore, entreat them, not to leave me alone. " But why should you *mind* being left alone for an hour or two ? " they would ask. " Nothing can happen to you, and you know there are all the servants downstairs." Yes, I knew there were

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all the servants downstairs, but, dear friends though some of them were, the thought brought me no consolation. "I never minded being left alone when I was a little girl," my mother put forward in her mild way, as if this information were a complete solvent for my distress.

"I don't know *why* I mind, but I *do* mind," I sobbed, and seeing them pick up their furs I began to run up and down wringing my hands — and I can remember my astonishment at seeing them the first time it happened making this peculiar gesture entirely of themselves.

Aunt Flora always positively bristled with desire to make the young behave correctly. To have her in opposition was fatal. Her features had settled now into an expression of pious determination that I knew only too well. "Come with me, dear," she said firmly, and leading me upstairs, took me towards my small row of children's books, the contents of which I already knew almost by heart, and told me to choose one. But what good were children's books against the principalities and powers of darkness with which my spirit was assailed? Terror and shock had prised my mind open too

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far, and it would not shut again. My mother and aunt knew little of these disturbances, and, with the cheerful easiness of the grown-up mind, discounted what they did know. Neither did they connect my anguish now at being left alone with the fact that it was during this hour between tea and dinner that I had first realized I had lost Mary. The principle of delayed shock was not known to them. Fortunately for themselves, neither of them was, by her very temperament, capable of entering those sinister portals of the mind through which I had already passed. Surprised as they would have been had they been told, I was an initiate where they were novices.

This going-off gaily to a party leaving a scared child might give the reader an entirely wrong impression of my most dear and most gentle mother. Actually, she disliked parties almost as much as I did. If she went, she went on the conventional principle of doing what one was expected to do. What she really enjoyed was reading her 'dear *Times*' over the drawing-room fire, going to concerts, collecting Chelsea figures, and eating buns when they were hot.

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Now, on these evenings I was, according to my mother and aunt, acting in a strange and unaccountable way, and for a child to be strange and unaccountable was, according to the tenets of their own upbringing, wrong. Wrong, be it understood, on the part of the child — wrongness elsewhere not being considered. To have given in to me would have been displeasing to the Creator in the sense that they were acting as his mouthpiece, and to have mitigated my lot would have been betraying their trust.

Every time my poor mother and aunt prepared to go out there was a repetition of this deplorable scene. It finally became evident that the vehemence of my protests amounted to a strike, a strike against the arranged order of the evening, and my mother decided to appeal to my father, the final arbitrator, the domestic Supreme Court. She waited till the next occasion when she and Aunt Flora were going off, and, as they said good-bye in the hall, told me in her still gentle but now grieved voice that my father was in the drawing-room and had something to say to me. Dishevelled with weeping I stood at the hall-door watching

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them drive off into the dark, trying to attain some sort of steadiness before I faced my father, for tears of themselves roused his annoyance. Then, stiff with apprehension, I went up to the drawing-room door and turned the handle. I was fond of the drawing-room because I connected it with my mother, but now, as I went in, I saw my father sitting where my mother always sat, and the sight of his emphatic profile in the place where I was accustomed to the slight pastel of my mother's face at once turned the room from summer to winter.

"Sit where I can see you," said my father.

I placed myself opposite him, and saw, almost with stupefaction, that his hazel eyes were smiling. I had never yet known him anything but angry when I was in disgrace, and I found this departure from a set rule so surprising that the first part of his little speech was lost on me. For it was not to be a discussion, a getting to the root of the matter and finding a way out; that, to my father, would have been unthinkable, a pandering to a mere child. I had never hoped for anything of that sort; for any attempt on my own part at

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discussion was always met with a terse ‘*don’t argue.*’ So now he merely stated his views, pointing out to me the ridiculousness of my behaviour at the age I had reached, and telling me I ought to exercise more self-control. Theoretically, as regards self-control, he was perfectly right, but what escaped him was that my self-control had had too great a strain put on it too early, and that in consequence the mechanism had for the time being broken down. My father ended his exhortation by saying that if there were any recurrence of this behaviour ‘other arrangements’ would have to be considered. Innocuous as this sounds, smilingly as it was uttered, it was to me the worst threat possible. That of being sent away to school. This to me, implying separation from my mother, was one of the hidden dreads of my life. Always held over my head, it had taken on the aspect of a kind of penal servitude.

“Well,” said my father, “that’s all. You can go now,” and, getting up, he went over to the hearth-rug, and stood warming his back at the fire. Brought up to thank him on every possible occasion, I felt that this was probably one of them. “Thank you, Father,” I

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murmured politely, and, getting up, turned to the door.

“*Pick up the cushion!*” shot from him like the crack of a pistol, and again, in a voice of indignation in its final reaches: “*Pick up the cushion!*”

The sense of sin jerked through me like a sharply pulled string, and, turning, I saw that I had knocked down one of the sofa-cushions. “Oh! I *am* so sorry,” I stammered, and stretching my arms round the cushion’s plump body I heaved it back on to the sofa. But I did not heave it enough. With a sound of slipping silk it was on the floor again in an instant. An indescribable sound came out of my father. Too horrified now even to apologize, face aflame, I got the cushion up again, and made for the door. Even without looking in his direction I could feel my father’s frown drilling into my spine, and self-consciousness at once cramped my movements.

“Hold *up!*” rang out from the hearth-rug.

I writhed my body upwards and backwards from my hips, and, ramrod fashion, reached the door-handle. Time and space, and a good quantity of both, would have to separate us

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now before we could meet again, my father without sense of outrage, I without sense of sin.

I shut the door quietly. The hanging light on the landing suffused this well-known little piece of indoor landscape. I had an intimate knowledge of the effect of motionless light falling on to motionless objects: an equal awareness of my own living body alone among things that were not living. The misery that, confronted by my father, I had managed to keep down, surged over me. I got to the stairs, took hold of the rail, and draggingly started to climb up. As I reached the first turning I heard the drawing-room door open behind me, the click of a switch being turned off, and then my father's steps as he trod heavily downstairs. Through the banister there arose faint sounds that told me he was struggling into his coat. There followed the wrenched opening, the sharp shutting of the inner hall door. A moment's silence, and then the violent, the terrific bang of the front door as it was slammed-to. For a second this report as of a cannon vibrated through every floor, through my body: and then the house

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closed in on itself . . . intense quiet, the sense of void, pressed upon me.

I sank down where I was on the stairs and twisted my arms round the railings, for experience had taught me that when weeping began it was best to cling on to something that was firm. There had up till now always been the hope in my mind that something might be done, some change made so that I should not have to endure these torturing evenings, but the knowledge gained during my eight years told me that now that my father had pronounced judgment there was no possible hope from any quarter. Everything was to go on exactly as it always had gone on. It was one of those moments when a situation suddenly becomes nakedly clear ; one of those pressures that minutely, imperceptibly, but relentlessly change the child mind into the adolescent, the adolescent into the mature. A moment when life offers one a news-sheet on which is printed in unmistakable words what before one had not fully realized. What this particular news-sheet informed me of was that one can be called on to suffer intolerably without those around one being concerned in the least. All the

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sediment of my daily existence, its denials and dreariness, its ingrained apprehensions and fears, the loss of Mary, the sense of lack of support anywhere — all suddenly blew up in my mind in a hurricane of desperation. A new terror rushed upon my overwrought spirit: a terror of being alive at all. The moment is marked in my mind like the turned-down page of a book. Panic-stricken, I struggled to find a way of escape, and could find none. . . . And then, drawing strength from all those empty rooms, from those dark doorways and landings, an invisible monster took form . . . it crept nearer . . . its baleful shadow fell across my mind. "Kill yourself," whispered this ghastly visitant, "Kill yourself." My mind received the message, dwelt on it. Here was a way of escape. Across the confusion of my mind the thought shone out. "Kill yourself," again came that obscure admonishment, "Kill yourself." But how could I do it? I remembered having been taken one winter's day by my governess to the Embankment: I had peered over the stone wall into that gloomy river and known (I suppose it was one of the dismal things I had been told) how despairing men

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and women had flung themselves into those cold waters. I tried now to think out how in my own case it could be managed, how in the first place I was to find my way to the Embankment, for I had never, even in daylight, been out in the streets alone. A whole new series of problems rose before me. But, actually, by now I was too exhausted with weeping to think out anything clearly, much less to formulate any plan of action. Gradually my thoughts slipped and took a different turn. These rending sounds that came ripping upwards seemed to be so tearing the very substance of my body that I began to wonder, quite dispassionately, as if I were considering someone else, whether if they went on much longer, I should fall in two in the middle. I distinctly remember this absurdity crossing my mind, and then, as far as the incident has lingered in my memory, there is a complete black-out.

PART II

THE PICNIC ON THE DOWNS

I T IS AUGUST: THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS AT my mother's old home. I am now ten years old: taller, thinner, leggier. Behind me as I stand on the stone terrace the big Adam house seethes in the heat. Beneath each tree in the park lies a great blotch of shadow, and within these shadows the fallow deer crouch. The valley is lost in haze. In their tubs along the terrace the flaming geraniums seem transfixed in this vast outpour of sun, each blazing petal illumined, each upheld leaf aglow. And all this warmth, this glow, is within me as well as without, for one of the great moments of the year has arrived, the edict has gone forth, 'a picnic on the downs,' and true to the traditions of the house and of the summer holidays, those of the family who live there and the cousins who, like myself, are staying there, have risen up in a body and are going to it.

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Not quite all, however, for this day Gerry, the other child in the house, has gone off to a party, but I, for some reason unknown to myself, have not been allowed to go, and this deprivation, as the grown-ups consider it, has raised me for these few hours into an object of sympathy. Actually this sympathy is unnecessary, as I detest parties as much as ever, but, as I have gradually discovered, and often to my bewilderment, the grown-ups bestow or withhold sympathy according to set rules that have nothing to do with my feelings.

The holidays this year at Hilldrop were specially halcyon to me, for I was in love. A new figure this summer had been added to the usual family party, that of a holiday tutor for my cousin. Mr. Ridford was a broad-shouldered young man who breathed geniality. He wore a blazer and a cap to match, and in the sun he would pull this cap over his nose, and then, chin in air, and smiling, peer up from under the peak ; and when he did that, anyone who happened to be standing near him smiled too. Mr. Ridford was very nice to everyone in the house, and everyone in the house made a point of being very nice to him. Personally, I

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found everything he said, did, or ate of overwhelming interest. Any observation he made, any chance remark I happened to overhear, was received by me as a little present that I carried about delightedly in my mind, adding it to my collection of other little presents of the same sort which he had already bestowed on me.

In one way Hilldrop differed from other country-houses : no one ever sat out of doors. In the garden were flowers and trees, lawns and bushes, but no deck-chairs, no out-door cushions. But very soon after the tutor's arrival a new striped deck-chair was to be seen on the lawn, and sunk within it, in an accomplished and masterful manner, his head very low and his white flannelled knees very high, Mr. Ridford. A startling example to my child-mind of how a newcomer, apparently simply by smiling, could upset the tradition of years. Besides the deck-chair Mr. Ridford had acquired a large travelling-rug which he laid beneath it. This rug, forming a square in the middle of the green lawn, had a touch of the magic carpet about it, and there, as I played about in the garden, I would eye the tutor deep in con-

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tentment with his chair, his cigarette, and his novel. Sometimes, getting up and pulling his cap over his eyes, he would saunter off to the kitchen-garden to pick himself a few plums. No one else staying at Hilldrop picked the fruit, they waited till it was given them. Mr. Ridford loved a ripe plum. He would stand on the lawn in the sun biting into his plum with his strong teeth, and when the juice ran down his hands he would say "Ooo-aah!" in a way that no one else in the house did, and taking out a very large and very clean white handkerchief he would wipe each finger carefully, and laugh.

Dear as Hilldrop was to me, his presence had added an enchantment to the air, had further gilded every room and passage, every garden-path and shrub. One never knew when coming down the stairs that one would not catch a flash of his blazer disappearing through the glass door that opened on to the terrace; or, running soundlessly in one's indiarubber-soled shoes by chance through the open door of the billiard-room, one might have the felicity of finding him there. So shadowy was the great room, every blind drawn against the sun, that

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one would stand in the middle waiting to see properly, one's eyes dazzled by the flashing streak of sunlight along the edge of each dark blind, hearing one's own quickened breathing and, from outside, the soft clicketing of the mowing machine. It was then, perhaps, one would see the back of Mr. Ridford's head, dark above the scarlet padding of one of the wicker chairs. And if he was there, and heard one, with a quick twist of his body that made the chair creak, he would turn his head and smile out a friendly "Hullo!" The glow of kindness that came from that man! His smile seemed to run, warm and golden, through one's veins. Very shyly one would say "Hullo!" in return, and then fly from the room, the air lifting one's hair as one rushed down the passage, then out through the little white gate in the quadrangle into the garden, and then jump the circle of flower-beds in the middle of the lawn.

And now to-day, on this coaching picnic, Mr. Ridford was to be one of the party! At Hilldrop, coach and horses were a family tradition: the advent of motors made no difference; on certain days the coach was to be taken out

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just in the same way as past generations had always taken it out.

It was close on three o'clock, the time to start. I ran into the house, and up the stairs, rushed down a passage on the top floor, burst open a door, broke into the peace of a sunlit bedroom, whirled a hair-brush, seized a hat, and at that moment heard the familiar sound of coach and horses starting from the far side of the quadrangle . . . first the rattling grind on the cobbles, then the crunch of gravel as the porch was neared. There was not a moment to lose. Along the passage I skimmed : down the first flight with the window at the bottom facing me : twirled round, second flight, yellow coal-box, and dark picture within whose depths goats and naked shepherd glimmered : third flight, with that Kneller man watching me : short flight with china cupboard on the landing with the bowls of pot-pourri on top : last flight with portrait of my aunt hanging on the wall : final twirl, and I was in the hall, filled now with all the lovely agitation of departure.

The front doors were open, and beyond, filling the porch, large as some primæval monster,* stood the coach. Within the hall my

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relations scrimmaged about : wraps were torrif from cupboards, rugs upheaved from chests ; driving gloves in a drawer were tossed to and fro. Were they the right pair ? Were these the wrong pair ? The right pair were found : they were not found : they were found. Aunt Flora's maid was leaning over the banister : Aunt Flora was conducting a hissing conversation with her in a whisper : Aunt Flora's maid was running up the stairs : the footmen darted in and out of the swing-door that led to the pantry : somebody trod on somebody's toe : there were exclamations, cries, laughter.

Standing aside at the back of the hall watching us was my great-grandmother. With one hand she supported herself against one of the hall tables, with the other she held with that grasping clutch of the very young and the very old a royal blue and grey woollen shawl which she was crocheting. On the wall of the staircase just behind her hung a picture of her when she was nineteen : the gilt frame seemed hardly able to contain the white foam of her flounces, her spaniel ringlets hung seductively each side of her young oval face, and the inward smile of her eyes announced the certainty of a

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serene crescendo of felicity. It was as if one instant of her youth had been actually captured and placed, still living, within this case of glass and gilt. So far the experiment had been successful, but what if one day the glass were removed? Would that moment of life that it covered instantly escape and disappear as all the rest of her youth had disappeared? But between this tranquil figure on the wall of the stairs and my great-grandmother as she stood in the hall there was an immensely long bridge — a bridge of which I knew nothing. I saw her, as it were, simultaneously at the beginning and at the end of it, and that was all. Now, between her wrinkled lids, her eyes were like washed-out, dissolving flowers, and the chiseled ivory of her face seemed too fragile to receive the impact of life. As the Chinese gods on a porcelain vase stand, each on his own island of cloud, so the successive generations had planted my great-grandmother on a small cloud composed of a tradition that she was, morally, a superior being. The ether in which her cloud floated was one of religion, and as a secretary shows the reflected authority of his chief by the portfolio under his arm, so my great-grand-

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mother's opinions had the appearance of receiving divine confirmation from her constantly carrying about with her a small pile of dingily-covered books of devotion. From these depended the tails of bookmarkers made of coloured ribbon or of perforated cardboard patterned with silks in cross-stitch. These bookmarkers were in varying stages of newness or decay, and some of the newer ones had been made by myself. As I would laboriously stick a minute photograph of some Biblical picture on to a piece of coloured ribbon I would be pleased as I thought of the small cost of the materials, the good effect they made when stuck together, and the Sunday appearance of the whole present, an appearance which would, I hoped, impress my great-grandmother in my favour.

This favour was not easy to obtain. From her tall, black-clothed figure there always issued an atmosphere of faint contempt for the activities of those around her. When she was called on to show an interest in the futilities of the very young, her smile, beginning in her eyes like a lit candle, would creep slowly down to her thin lips, which, as they reluctantly

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curved, would at the same time assume a curiously satirical expression, and that which had begun as a smile would end as a protest.

But now there was a general movement to the door, and farewells were being cried out to my great-grandmother. I added mine to the others, but was careful not to catch her eye, fearful that an amusedly contemptuous gleam might quench, even for a moment, the rich flow of life supplied by this full-blooded afternoon. Now we were all in the porch, buzzing round the coach. There it stood with its varnished panels, patiently waiting to allow the family to clamber on to its back. The horses splayed out on to the gravel beyond, a groom at each fidgeting head. The quadrangle, the house, every object on which one's glance fell, was peacefully a-swim in the August sunshine. From the door of the coach-house the stablemen were watching us: at an upper window two of the housemaids gazed as from a box in the theatre at this equine display. The white Persian, sitting on the grass by the house, licked at the sunlight on his paws: a flying

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footman with a tea-basket impinged on his fur : without so much as raising his eyes he rose, moved a few inches, sat down again, and continued to lick. Meanwhile, I had crept round to inspect the horses. And when I say inspect I mean inspect, for a great part of my time at Hilldrop was spent in the stables, where, sketch-book in hand, I would make laborious studies of the horses' tails and hind-quarters. This peculiar view of them was not mine by choice but of necessity, it being, in fact, the only view I was able to get, tied up as each was in its stall. I cherished a hope that one day my uncle would be so impressed by my drawings that he would give orders that in future any horse I so wished should be turned the other way round, and that I should be able to draw, not tails, but heads. However, as actually I could hardly persuade him even to glance at my drawings, my hope showed little prospect of fulfilment. The stables held for me an almost mystical charm : that subtle, uplifting smell which met one the moment one pushed open the door, that special horse-and-straw atmosphere, that quick pull on the halter and swung-round enquiring face, those stirrings in

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further stalls, that rustling of straw, that occasional deep, patient sigh. Eager to be drawn into still closer communion with the stable-world, I would open the bin against the wall and eat the oats.

Devotee as I was of stable life, there was one aspect of it I definitely disliked — the moment after luncheon on Sunday when all the horse-loving members of the family streamed out of the house to feed the horses with sugar. That starch-blue paper bag filled to the brim with lumps of gleaming sugar — how I winced when I saw it standing waiting for us after luncheon on the hall table !

“ Here, Dolly, you may carry it if you like ! ”

“ Thank you, Uncle Reggie.”

Procession across the courtyard from house to stables. Then, once arrived, “ Now, dear, hold out your hand . . . that’s right . . . put the lump well in the middle . . . there, now put your hand right under Consul’s mouth . . . keep it *flat*, dear child . . . *be sure to keep it flat.*” I detected slight nervousness in the grown-up voice, and it was precisely that nervousness and that ‘ *keep it flat* ’ which frightened me. It meant that if my fingers

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perked up ever so little, then those gargantuan¹ teeth . . . no, I simply couldn't think of it. And, too, what if those fumbling lips thought that hand as well as sugar were being offered as nourishment? How could Consul really *know* . . . ? And, if he did think that, nothing could save me. It would all be over in a moment.

How thankful I was when, having given the last piece of sugar, and coming out again into the sunlit glare of the courtyard, I could pull out my handkerchief, rub the saliva off the palms of my hands, and comfort myself with the thought that a whole week would intervene before next sugar-day.

Now, on this picnic occasion, I saw with interest that the near leader was Comet, the most nervous and excitable member of the stable. At the moment he had been persuaded by the groom, Joe, to place himself in that position which man has decided is the most pleasing to himself in which to see a stationary horse ; head well up, forelegs planted out stiffly together in front, hind-legs stuck out equally stiffly behind. I was having a little chat with Joe, who was my chief stable-friend, when

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Mr. Ridford strolled up. He glanced at the rigidly posed horse with the white-breeched groom at its head. "Jolly old blighter!" he said, and gave Comet a playful prod with his stick. If a pistol had been discharged in Comet's ear the shock could hardly have been greater. Instantly he turned into a scrimmaging lunatic: in his rearing and scuffling the gravel spurted and flew. Joe had gone scarlet, and so had I. I was scandalized. To touch a horse without warning! To poke him in the ribs with a stick! To address him as "jolly old blighter!" Accustomed from babyhood to my uncle's stables, I knew all the proper shades of intercourse between man and horse. There was a certain tone in which to speak to a horse, certain expressions used in addressing it, and "jolly old blighter" was not one of them. As for touching a horse, a whole ritual had to be observed so as not to upset its feelings. It must be approached from the front so that it could see you, then the slowly extended hand must be accompanied by a smoothly reassuring voice speaking the proper horse language, and then, these preliminaries accomplished, one might venture to touch it, first

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near the head and so continuing, still with the proper observations, on other parts of its body. That Mr. Ridford should not know these things! That, having done this unspeakable thing, he should stand there smiling, and merely remark, "Seems a bit nervous!" I should hear about this in the stables to-morrow. Joe was not the man to let treatment like that of one of his horses pass unnoticed. And then, when Mr. Ridford was criticized and condemned, as criticized and condemned he would be, how could I be loyal to him without defending his behaviour, and how defend behaviour that ran counter to everything I had been taught? For the moment the glory of the afternoon was dimmed. I turned back to the coach. My uncle was already on the box, he had gathered up the reins and was adjusting the couplings, at the same time dropping a few remarks on to the stud-groom's upturned face. This stud-groom, Barby, was one of those little, gnarled old men who seem specially produced by stable life. To him the coach and horses were the beginning, the middle, and the end of existence. Now he propped against the side of the coach a little iron ladder, and up this

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the ladies of the party scrambled. They bustled about on the top, all at once appearing surprisingly high up to those still standing below. Final wraps and rugs were thrown up and arranged: tea-baskets were put in. But the horses, weary of all these preparations, became restless. Comet started pawing at the gravel.

"Have done! Have done!" scolded Barby.

"Now then, steady, steady!" suavely exhorted my uncle.

Aunt Flora poured her kind syrup on the restless back: "Good boy! Good boy! Are you getting tired of waiting then?"

Here was the correct horse-language! Hearing it, Mr. Ridford would surely realize how he himself had blundered, and feel uncomfortable. I felt for him all the embarrassment that I imagined he must be feeling himself, but a stolen glance at his serene countenance convinced me that I had no need. I experienced a prick of astonishment at realizing for the first time that other people do not invariably feel what it seems inevitable that they should. I took this new and surprising discovery with me as, cat-like, I scrambled up to the back of

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the coach. The final tea-basket and wrap had been put in : we were ready to start. I waved to the housemaids at the window, and they responded energetically, eager even by this slender thread to be attached to so much glory. My uncle bent slightly forward over his beloved animals. "Come along!" he said gently. The eagerly awaited message slipped into the eight listening ears. The grooms leaped back. Barby, too, stood aside as horses and coach passed before him. This was how he liked to see them on a fine summer's afternoon : horses with sliding muscle beneath smooth coat : harness silver flashing pin-points of sunlight : glistening coach turreted with the family. He swung himself up on to the seat opposite my own. On his queer little leathery face was a private smile of complete satisfaction.

We curved round the quadrangle, we roused the archway with our rattle, we briskly trotted up the drive. We were, in fact, off ! Whereas a few moments before we had been each a separate person with a hundred different movements of mind and limb, we had now become one united body, giving ourselves up to the

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consciousness of the swift, forward-trotting movement. One or two of the Jerseys, posed in the lush grass, stopped their munching to look at us ; the big white gate in the park, which a groom jumped down to open, was left behind us, lazily click-clicketing.

Now we were in the avenue that led to the high road. Joe was standing up with the horn, about to warn Mrs. Harris at the lodge of the splendour that was bearing down upon her. In my extreme youth I would beg that the horn should be blown in season and out, but by ten I had learnt that there is a time to blow and a time to abstain from blowing. Enchanted, I gazed at this purple-faced Boreas making at one end of the horn the soundless but intense effort which would in a moment ooze out at the other like a thin gold ribbon into the air. I was by now an expert critic on the exact sound that should issue from a horn, and according to Joe's performance I would offer congratulations or sympathy. But now we were nearly at the lodge. As we came nearer, Mrs. Harris's shiny smile grew broader ; here indeed was the lust of the eye and the pride of life emblazoning itself across the passive vacuity

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of an August afternoon. Aunt Flora, whose conversational kindness leaped up like a jack-in-the-box at the merest suggestion of contact with another human being, instantly started enquiring as to Harris's lumbago. However, her cried-out interrogations and Mrs. Harris's attempts to deal with them were lost in our clatter, and we splashed through the gates and out on to the high road. As we turned to the left we saw for one instant the grey church by the town pond. But that instant was enough — for me it was no longer Thursday afternoon but Sunday morning, and I was sitting, one of the long family row in the front pew of yellow varnished wood, hoping for, but seldom achieving, an entire hassock and hymn-book to myself.

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We sat waiting for the service to begin, staring at a painfully vulgar stained-glass window that had blazed its crude colours into our eyes times unnumbered. Softly the organ notes purled into the air, but, oh joy, in the distance was heard the approaching band from the barracks playing the men to church. It came nearer, nearer: it was the relief column

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from the outside world marching to save us from the yellow varnished wood, from that horrible window. The organ now was at full blast, but the band was winning: nearer and nearer came its gold-tongued clashing: its tune and the organ's were inextricably, hideously entangled. Now the band was just outside, its triumph over the organ was complete: it was banging, it was clashing. "Hooray!" it roared, "hooray for full-blooded life!" Once more one was all gay again inside, saved by that determined band. Only by the most strenuous effort could one stop the corners of one's mouth from turning up.

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By now the coach was on the outskirts of the town. We sighted the workhouse, the cottage hospital, the lunatic asylum; these tried to catch hold of us as we passed with fingers of monotony, of frustration, of despair, but, inviolate, strongly massed upon our charging edifice, we dashed by them and escaped.

Steadily, rhythmically, we were swept onwards. Here were the downs beginning; the sense of airy void was growing upon us; we

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seemed to be shrinking smaller and smaller ! we seemed now a little fussy thing clattering its way into a vast silence. The clouds like huge galleons were adrift above us. Below them were their slow-moving shadows, shadows so ethereal that they seemed barely to brush the tips of the grass across which they moved : a stretch of sunlit down would be gradually absorbed by one of these feather-wings of darkness, a darkness that as it swept soundlessly onward again revealed the sunlight unsoiled by its passing. I turned from the clouds and my glance fell on Barby. His eyes were nearly closed, but the smile that started in the courtyard was still on his face. In the quadrangle he had reviewed the coach through his eyes, now he was reviewing it through his ears. Yes, said his smile, every sound was just as it should be : the monotonous, tireless trot-trotting of the sixteen hoofs, the grundling-grind of the wheels, the silvery rattle of the pole-chains, the occasional sharp clash of the bars as they swung behind the leaders : everything was precisely right ; his sense of achievement was complete.

But now a great moment was upon us.

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Turning off from the road, we embarked on the green sea of the down itself. In an instant the clattering and grinding were changed to a gentle thudding and rolling. These muted sounds made one strangely aware of the grass — softly and greenly it flowed into one, both through one's eyes and one's ears. A silence had fallen on our little company, but kind Aunt Flora felt herself called on to upraise what she considered were the drooping spirits of the family. She snuffed at the air. "How lovely it all is, dear Reggie!" she cried to my uncle's back, and her rather artificial voice cutting into the freshness of the down air gave one a curiously melancholy feeling. "How lovely it all is!"

My uncle took no notice. He was in fact at the moment entirely absorbed with a spectacle which was growing before his eyes: the spectacle of Comet's unorthodox behaviour. The instant we had turned on to the downs his ears had become stiffly pricked, and now he was flinging out his legs in the wildest manner; though he still trotted swiftly forwards he managed at the same time to give the impression that he was dancing, his harness had taken

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on an odd look and seemed as if at any moment it might fly from his body. He was no longer one of the team, he had become a separate entity.

My mother never took her eyes off Comet's ears : a black gulf had suddenly opened before her, full of the most hideous possibilities. What unspeakable folly to have placed all these precious lives at the caprice of a mere horse ! Why, oh why, had she not spent a quiet afternoon in the garden reading her dear *Times* . . . Merciful heavens ! the animal was beginning to plunge !

We seemed to be bowling along still quicker, there was a sensation of ever-increasing haste. Mr. Ridford, his hand on the brake, was leaning forward, ready, at the slightest word from my uncle, to apply it. By twisting round in my seat I could just see the tutor's face. A stiff little smile lay across it, quite different from his usual one. I knew just what that odd little grimace meant, for I had seen it in illustrations of the boy hero in books of adventure. Mr. Ridford's smile meant, " we are in danger, but we are all going to behave beautifully, and the women and children must be saved first." To

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"be saved by Mr. Ridford ! I shut my eyes :
" Oh God," I prayed, without any sense of impiety, " let the coach turn over." Remembering I had on my new country hat, I took it off so that when the crash came it should not get spoilt ; then, thinking that possibly I looked better with it on, I put it back on my head. (*" Dear child ! don't fidget ! "*) All the same, I knew at heart that the coach would not turn over. Used from infancy to clamber about that solid body, I knew more about it than Mr. Ridford did. I knew how steady the wheelers were, how competent a driver was my uncle. No, it was useless for Comet to pit his green and gay youth against the Hilldrop family. But all the same he was doing his best. Now he was plunging again. His leather harness seemed so much ribbon.

" Comet ! "

The name shot from my uncle's mouth, levelled with deadly accuracy at Comet's head : it was the voice of the law and order of the Hilldrop stables : the law and order of the Hilldrop family behind the stables.

Useless !

My mother could bear it no longer. Her

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eyes had ceased to be eyes, and had become cold blue stones of terror. She leaned forward, she gripped the back of the seat in front of her : her voice, taut with the effort of self-control, sharply pierced the air. " Reggie, surely we had better *stop* ! "

My uncle did not answer her. No one answered her, and this silence gave a dramatic touch to the situation. On we swept across the green down.

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We had arrived, and nothing had happened. I had noticed that it was seldom anything did happen. There would be ascending excitement and commotion among the older members of the family. Excitement and commotion ascending quicker, quicker . . . and then nothing had happened, and everything would be just as it was before.

I watched the gradual severance from each other of coach, family, horses, rugs, and tea-baskets. It gave one a curious feeling to see everything coming apart like this before one's eyes, as if some invisible glue which had before held us all in position had suddenly lost its power. We stretched up to pat the horses' hot,

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living skins, realizing as we touched them what fiery intensity had been expended to bring us, comfortably sitting, drawn coolly through the air, to this far place. I wandered away on the down's short grass. Here was a harebell upraised on its green wire stalk. I threw myself face downwards and saw the little bells of air-ball blue and the upstanding blades of grass silhouetted against the sky, and, swift on the instant, with the feel of the grass against my face, there penetrated me the inner, intimate life of these little, green, growing things: a minute life supported and not crushed by this silent vastness in which they trembled with every feather breeze. The void sea of down around us quickened this sense of intimacy, and in its turn the Lilliputian world against my face murmured of the peaceful immensity in which it was cradled. . . . Far below lay the great valley: hedgerow and field, field and hedgerow, lapping away and away to the diaphanous horizon. I tried to discover which clump of trees enclosed Hilldrop. Hilldrop, in whose rooms of sunlit emptiness my great-grandmother was sitting even at this moment with her crochet, faintly disapproving. Out-

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lined against the sky the coach stood bereft of life, its long pole vacuously sticking out in front : the grooms were in continuous movement round the horses, wiping off thin sheets of sweat from their skins, taking out little tins and rags from the boot of the coach, and applying themselves to their lifelong task of polishing the harness. The footman we had brought with us had taken the cushions from the coach seats, and was arranging them in a ring on the grass : far from our home, he was faithfully trying to create for us something that approached as nearly as possible to a room, a little memory of Hilldrop. But Aunt Flora's voice shrilled through the air calling me to tea, and I joined the group now seated on the cushions. Everyone was noticeably quiet : not yet quite recovered from Comet's display. My uncle rather ruefully examined his strapped wrist ; always thus strapped for driving, it being a tradition of the Hilldrop stables that the horses should be kept on the edge of excitement. Aunt Maud, I could see, was worried, fearing my uncle had strained a muscle. My mother, her thoughts clearly occupied with the return journey, was silent.

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"The other relations made remarks at intervals, but chiefly occupied themselves with munching. After all, to munch was the ostensible reason why we had come here. Mr. Ridford, who lay leaning on his elbow, stirring his tea, which he had placed on the grass in front of him, was the only one among us who seemed to be really enjoying himself.

Aunt Flora always disliked a long silence ; especially on such a gay occasion as a picnic. "Delicious little scones, dear !" she cried to Aunt Maud, shaking at her a half-eaten scone.

"They are just the same as we always have at home," said Aunt Maud.

Aunt Flora tried again. "I do think it's *such* a good idea having the coach cushions to sit on — it makes us so *delightfully* comfortable, doesn't it, Clare ? "

"What, dear . . . ? " said my mother vaguely.

"These cushions, dear ; I was saying I think they are so very . . . "

I let myself fall backwards on to the grass and stared at the sky. It was just the blue of the little square of cerulean in my paint-box lying in the drawer at home, but here there was

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an ocean of cerulean, and, afloat on it, those dazzling, those immense islands of cloud. The white glare of them hit against my eyeballs : my eyes felt as if they were being prized open . . . wider . . . wider . . . the clouds seemed to be pouring themselves into me, to flood my being till at last I felt all cloud, and empty of everything but them and their slow, continuous drifting. My mind dilated with a happiness that overflowed. Share this exaltation with someone I must. I sat up and found Mr. Ridford had come round to my side of the tablecloth for another cup of tea.

“Do you know,” I said, “if you lie on your back and stare and *stare* at the clouds they seem to get right inside you ! ”

He looked at me for a moment, gently amused. “You are a very strange little girl,” he smiled.

I lowered myself backwards again on to the grass, my pulses hammering. What, oh what did the word ‘strange’ mean when used like that ? If only I knew ! Was it an insult, or was it, by any remotest chance, a compliment ? It seemed improbable that suddenly, in the middle of a picnic, from that friendly, sunburned

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*face there would emerge an insult : on the other hand, it seemed equally improbable it was a compliment, a thing so far I had never received from any grown-up person. Criticism, reproof, strictures of an embarrassing nature on my appearance or character, but compliments never. If only I dared ask someone ; some older person who would really know ! But to ask an older relation a question was full of danger. Seldom would they answer and then let one go. Amusement was generally aroused ; questions would in turn be put to oneself, questions before which the flimsy defences with which one tried to hide some minute but sedulously guarded secret would go down in an instant. No : better never be enlightened as to what Mr. Ridford meant by that odd remark than take such a risk.

.

We were on our way home : ceaselessly trotting forward into the slowly gathering dark. A peaceful and contented silence had fallen on us. Just as the dusk had wiped the colour out of the trees and hedges, so, curiously, it seemed to have wiped out our individual characters, leaving only a general atmosphere

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of a unified and kindly quality. We had the sense of having supported each other through this adventure on which, at three o'clock in the afternoon, we had launched ourselves, an adventure which had been brought to a successful conclusion and from which we were returning each with his own emotional spoils. Now we were back at the avenue, trotting in at the end of its long telescope where before we had trotted out. Under the sheltering arms of the trees the darkness wrapped itself ever more closely and tenderly around us. A sense of the sweetest content and happiness filled my being, a happiness which in some unexplained way seemed to be gently beaten from the ground with the monotonous trotting hoofs, a happiness made yet more poignant when at rare intervals someone in a low voice let fall a few words in tones that unconsciously hushed themselves with the hush of night — like the sudden-heard flutter of a bird in a silent hedgerow, a little sound that is, and then is not.

We were just about to turn into the archway. The long horn was upraised: in the dark its leaping ribbon was of a clearer gold,

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it flew across the park, it became entangled in the trees, it faded and died in the far curtain of darkness across the valley.

("Back!" said the housemaid going the round of the bedrooms with the hot-water cans.

"There they are!" out-breathed my great-grandmother, gathering up her crochet, and, reluctantly, her face suffered her slow smile.)

We were home again. We crowded into the brightly lit hall. There was my great-grandmother, there was the butler, there were the hall tables, the great china jars, the staircase, and the pictures on its walls, but in some indefinable way the downs had come in with us, and for several hours afterwards everything looked a little strange, in some odd way different from what it usually did.

Just as before there had been the commotion of departure, so now there was the commotion of arrival. Coats and wraps were flung off. We stretched ourselves, blinking in the blare of light. The footmen, leaping on to the coach like agile harlequins, now seized and pulled out all the articles that before they had put in. One moment the hall was filled with

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the coaching party, the next it was empty. The footmen had folded and put away everything : the coach was gone : the front doors were shut. My uncle had returned to his study, the other men to the billiard-room : Aunt Flora had trotted off upstairs to take up, at the point at which the coaching expedition had broken it off, her lifelong conversation with her maid : the other aunts and cousins, too, scurried upstairs : there was the sound of opening and shutting doors . . . then silence.

I was alone. Slowly I climbed the stairs, and, when I was half-way up, I stopped and leant over the banister. I had a special reason for loitering behind and for stopping at this particular place. Here I was almost on a level with the hanging chandelier that lit the hall with its four gas lamps. Three of these burned soundlessly, but the flame of the fourth sang a low, perpetual song. The sweetness to me of that soft, most familiar sound in the silent house ! Always as far back as I could remember it had sung its hushed golden song ; it was, as it were, the inner living voice of Hilldrop — Hilldrop, my childhood's Paradise, and of all places on earth the most dear. It sang

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of leaf-shadowed garden paths ; of black grapes drooping heavily in the tropic world of the hot-houses ; of cold, smooth apples in the orchard among their tufted leaves ; of the soft hound-puppies with their little swinging bellies ; of the deer in the park giving their shrill cries at sunset ; of a minute pink frog that I kept in the garden tank, whose leap was so swift that one could not see it ; of the potting-shed, and the fluffy black mould left sticking inside the flower-pots ; of the sound of the garden door beneath its fan of coloured glass as one opened it on the inside, and of the spacious, open-air sound as one shut it on the outside ; of the enamelled laurel leaves in the shrubbery, slippery and cool against one's face as one pushed through them, but sheltering hidden twigs that tore small wounds in one's thin, hot skin ; of the tiers on tiers of pictures on the dining-room walls, like a perpetually open scrap-book ; of ivory-handled, gently-gliding mahogany doors ; of each morning's lovely awakening to the sight of the flowered yellow curtains illumined with sunlight, that hung over my windows : of the old nurse, Mrs. Turner, in her lilac-sprigged cotton

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dress-gown, walking about on those early summer mornings carrying a cup of steaming tea : of the nursery passage where we always played games on ' the last evening ' : of the sight of every familiar room and fireplace and landing : of the dearness of those who lived here : of the gold-powdered atmosphere of gentleness and laughter : it sang, in fact, of all the outpoured sweetness of Hilddrop.

On the four walls of the staircase my ancestors stared at me with immobile painted eyes. With wasp body and ruff, with lace collar and curls, with periwig and embroidered waistcoat, with powdered hair and folded fichu, with Hussar uniform and slung jacket, with plaid shawl and cameo brooch, they were trying, as ever, to look their best, dumbly asking for the approbation of the living : a defenceless regiment perpetually drawn up in their ranks for the review of their descendants as they passed up and down the staircase. " Deal gently with us," said their gas-illuminated faces, " deal gently with us, flesh of our flesh and thought of our thought ; we have projected you through the centuries, we are the mirrors in which you see yourself, and you in turn are

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the living mirror in which, however microscopically, we are reflected."

The baize door in the hall softly percussed the air as one of the footmen came through with a tray of little lamps all a-bloom within their rose silk shades. I could see him as he went through the open door into the dark drawing-room, placing the lamps about, one on each small table. Then I heard him drawing the window curtains, the clicketing of the curtain-rings sounding fainter as he gradually moved further down the big room. He came out again : the baize door gave to his pressure : it softly swung back . . . and there was complete stillness.

A thick-carpeted hush rose in the quiet air. The picnic tradition had been dutifully followed, and the Hilldrop family was at rest.

PART III

MORNING AT HILLDROP

*H*OW TREMULOUS WITH HAPPINESS WERE those summer morning awakenings when, from the deep waves of sleep in which I had been engulfed, I would open my eyes to find myself thrown up yet again on the sunlit Hilldrop shore. . . . The bloom of early morning lay over everything. Over my own mind still misted with sleep : over the big house whose peace in our own part of it was only broken by the intermittent knocking of the housemaid's brush against the passage wainscot : over the park lying outspread in the tranquil morning light, where in the dew-drenched grass the deer were stirring.

If I slid back again into sleep I would be wakened a little later by the ringing of the house bell which announced to everyone at Hilldrop, both within the house and without, that it was eight o'clock : to me most dear and

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*auspicious bell that, like a trumpeter, heralded all the coming delights of the day.

These delights began the moment when, escaped from the hands of my mother's maid, I started to run down the stairs. Night had rinsed the air clear as clear, and everywhere there was that fresh beginning-of-a-quite-new-day look : banister, stair-rails, and picture frames all glistening. A question was in my mind as I ran ; would I be in time for prayers ? For, my great-grandmother's spirit imprinting itself on the household, family prayers were still kept up at a time when in nearly every other house they had been dropped. If now I met the head housemaid giving the final flick of her feather-brush to the pot-pourri bowls on the landing (" Good-morning, Bertha," " Good-morning, Miss Dolly "), then I was certainly in time. If there were no Bertha on the stairs, then there was a doubt. Now I was running across the hall, running across the library, passing one light-flooded window after another. Now I was at the dining-room door, putting my head sideways against its glossy mahogany panels to discover whether I was in time or not. If the sounds that came from the other side

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were . . . one voice saying a few words . . . a pause . . . and then another voice saying another few words, then all was well, and I turned the handle and went in ; but if the sound was low, continuous droning, I thought, 'late again,' and turned back to the library. Here I was kept company by a stuffed eagle in a glass case. The eagle had not a pleasant look in its eye : in fact, from beneath those feathered, ferocious brows came the most malign glare I had ever encountered, and after gazing at the creature for a few moments with the fixed attention which at that time I bestowed on all animals, stuffed or living, I would turn away feeling uncomfortable. The Hilldrop glamour somehow stopped short at that eagle. I would wander over to the writing-table in the window and examine a big red-leather book marked on the cover in gold letters, *Visitors' Book*. It always interested me to turn it over and see what a different colour the leather was on the underneath side from the top side where the light from the window caught it. As I only stayed at Hilldrop for the family parties in the holidays, the autographed host within these pages was unknown to me. Standing there,

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turning the leaves one by one, it struck me as curious that each signature that trailed across the page stood for someone who had stayed at Hilldrop, who must have known it almost as intimately as I did, and yet whom I, to whom Hilldrop was so dear, had never seen. It was odd too how many ways there were of writing a signature. I would pore over them, greatly impressed by those which used up most ink : violent, powerful signatures that rushed convulsively from one side of the page to the other. These must, I thought, be the autographs of immensely grand and important people, and it was odd when I was older and met the original of one of these spectacular autographs to find her a little insignificant woman whose conversation ran almost entirely on the annoyances of a too small income.

One day, turning the pages further back than usual, I came across a long poem written by one of the guests. The theme of this poem was that the writer's valet had forgotten to pack his shooting-jacket, and in consequence he had been forced to borrow one of my uncle's. In working out this central idea the writer had managed to fling out compliments

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right and left : compliments to his host and hostess : compliments on the comfort of the house and the softness of his mattress : compliments on the number of birds waiting to be shot, and the succulence of these birds when they appeared on his plate : compliments on the ladies of the party, on their appearance, their clothes, their wit, their powers of charming him after dinner with song.

*Sweeter than the sound of dinner gong
To my listening ears are the strains of song.*

And not only did the house-party appear in his poem, but through it there moved the familiar figures of Rivage the butler, Clack the head-gardener, Harrison the keeper, Barby, and Joe.

I was agape with astonishment and admiration. Shakespeare was among my lesson books : the activities of Shylock, Titania, and Mark Antony were only too well known to me : for many hours I had been forced to keep them company, forced to listen to their boring observations, observations on matters so far removed from anything in my own experience that they only filled me with a sense of dreari-

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'ness. For though love of pictures was already astir in me, love of literature had not begun. But the quickening was on its way. A few more years, and one word of three letters, a word placed by Macaulay with the light perfection with which a leaf is poised on a stem, and my mind burst from its chrysalis.

*Unharm'd the water fowl may dip
In the Volsinian mere.*

My eyes received the imprint of the lines as they had received the imprint of thousands, but at the word 'dip' a tremor of appreciation went through me, an understanding of something I had before failed to understand. On the instant I was changed from a barbarian into a lover of letters.

But, meanwhile, as I sat there in my uncle's library, the cheery antics of a Hilldrop guest's mind dazzled my own. Here, in this doggerel, were interest and delight! Here were the sort of things that really happened, the sort of incidents one might any day see oneself, and all put patly into rhyme. It was these rhymes that particularly entranced me; especially the way people's names were made

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to rhyme with ordinary words : Clack, alack :
Harrison, sat-upon : Barby, party : and, final
felicity, *la belle*, bell — *la belle* referring to Aunt
Maud. Another delightful feature was the way
details were entered into. Out shooting, the
writer had missed a pheasant.

Gun raised, I saw the bird did swerve,
“That bird,” I thought, “has lost its nerve,”

this loss of nerve being accounted for by the
pheasant's shock at seeing a mere guest in one
of my uncle's coats. I clapped my hands over
my mouth to deaden my laughter. Never had
I met wit like this. Then there was a stirring
incident in which Aunt Maud figured, the
writer intercepting a falling coffee-spoon that
was heading straight for her chiffon skirts.
The final couplet struck a nostalgic note.

Would that every train I take would stop
At your enchanted Hilldrop, Hilldrop !

Marvellous ! Here, exactly, was my own
sentiment, but never should I have thought of
expressing it in this ingenious way. For the
first time I experienced the shock of pleasure
at finding some confused emotion of my own

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clarified in words. Elbows on table and chin on hands I gazed through the window at a group of trees in the park. Should I ever, was it within the bounds of possibility that I should ever, become sufficiently educated to write like this myself? How, by what road, did one arrive at it? Where was the connecting link between my gloomy struggles with lessons, lessons that never seemed to lead anywhere, and a brilliant performance of this sort? It was beyond me.

But now there came from the other side of the door the low scraping of chairs that meant that the long row of servants were getting up from their knees, and that prayers were over. I turned the door-handle, and there the whole breakfast-scene lay before me: the big green-walled dining-room; the big table frothed over with orchids, pink china, and silver; the pictures in their gold frames crowding the walls; my tall uncle standing up unfolding and refolding the sheets of his morning paper; Rivage stooping down to the wick of the spirit-lamp; figures of relations here and there sitting down shaking out their napkin, or standing peering into hot dishes on the side-table; while

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through the open windows could be seen the water-wagtails running up and down the dew-whitened lawn quirking their tails.

The day, the gorgeous Hilldrop day, had begun.

One at each end of the table sat Uncle Reggie and Aunt Maud. They were not only my uncle and aunt, not only my host and hostess, but in my mind two beings set apart. They were both of pale gold fairness, and this golden quality seemed to run into all their words and actions, giving a gracious sweetness to their whole atmosphere. I could remember clearly how once, at the age of three, as I lay in bed gently whimpering over some child misery, my uncle had strolled into the room. "What is the matter, my little dear?" he asked. The sudden vision of that glimmering shirt-front, the gentleness of the voice coming from that dimly seen face, kindness when according to nursery rule I deserved a scolding, so surprised and penetrated me that from that moment my heart was his. As for my aunt: "Lor'! What a picture!" my nurse would exclaim in admiration as, on party occasions, we peered at her from over top-staff banister

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or from nursery window. And my nurse was right.

Aunt Maud, Uncle Reggie, my great-grandmother, and Aunt Flora were, at that period of my life, the Hilldrop relations who stood out in the strongest colours. Aunt Flora had a tall agile figure, and a face sculptured on lines at once plain and aristocratic. But this plainness was lost in the effervescence of her personality. From her tiny green eyes poured rays of kindness — and, on occasion, when she was religiously shocked, darts of flint — and from her good-humoured, too large mouth a spate of conversation. But for two hostile chances, two slight swerves of fate, Aunt Flora would have been Vicereine of India. But fate defaulted, and instead of her lot being red carpets, bowing Maharajahs, and a personal association with the National Anthem, it was self-immolation to my great-grandmother in a small house in Curzon Street : a lifelong conversation with her maid on the slings and arrows of daily existence, and her being, in appearance, chained to her writing-table for hours at a time, composing letters of extraordinary complexity to tradesmen and charitable organiza-

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tions, or else making up her accounts. When these proved satisfactory she hurried off to Christie's and bought another writing-table; for to collect old furniture was her delight. She possessed a stick-at-nothing quality which made her the beloved family butt. This quality had the effect of making her deal with difficult situations in the most peculiar manner, as, for instance, when confronted with my governess, Mademoiselle Coppée. Always eager to establish the most friendly contacts with everyone she met, Aunt Flora, having forgotten all her French, would conduct her side of the conversation in broken English. It was a delight to hear her at it, her tottering phrases being proffered with perfectly sincere gravity.

Aunt Flora accepted the rôle of family butt with the enthusiasm with which she accepted everything that life offered her and, one might say, that life denied her. In no sense clever, she yet possessed a knack of efficiency that made her organize her household, play the harp, and collect *objets d'art* with astonishing success. But what was really interesting about her was that she was an expert in the art of living; let life offer her a handful of dust, and her

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exuberance would so irradiate it that it was dust no more. The words boredom and depression did not exist for her: this came, as I see now, in part from lack of development, but in part too from most admirable poise of intention.

There then are these familiar figures seated round the breakfast table, tapping on top of their eggs, eating kidneys and bacon, and buttering their toast. There are a number of other figures round the table too: my parents, men and women relations staying in the house, and, of course, Gerry and Mr. Ridford.

Breakfast was a good time to watch what Mr. Ridford ate, to notice which of the hot dishes he chose; whether, this course over, he got up and went to the sideboard to cut himself a slice of ham: whether, finally, his large square hand descended upon the silver lid of the marmalade jar or the jam jar. One day he got up from the table to give himself a second helping from the side dishes.

"Here, this plate will be hotter," said Uncle Reggie.

"Thanks," said Mr. Ridford, and then, "the last fish-cake!" he cried gaily, holding up the

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cover of the dish, "anyone want it?"

There were cries of "No . . . no . . . you have it." Just as he was going to sit down again he noticed my eyes riveted on his plate. "Why, I believe Dolly wants it!" he exclaimed, adding with the utmost good-nature, "here, you have it . . ." and, to my unspeakable embarrassment, whisked away my empty plate, and put the fish-cake down in front of me.

"Oh! no, no . . ." I stammered, and felt the blood rush to my face.

"Oh yes — you have it," he persisted. "Come," he laughed, "I saw you eyeing it like a hungry hound."

"You shouldn't stare at other people's plates, dear," said Aunt Flora, "it's a very rude habit."

By now attention all round the table was becoming focused on the fish-cake. I wanted to explain . . . to make Mr. Ridford eat his fish-cake himself . . . but how explain? . . . How begin to explain? . . . It was all far too complicated.

"What's she doing?" asked my father suddenly, looking over the top of his paper.

"Why," said Mr. Ridford, laughing, "she

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“wants a fish-cake and now I’ve given it her she won’t eat it !”

“ But . . . but . . . ” I stammered.

“ If you ask for a thing you should take it,” said my father shortly.

“ *Did* she ask for it ? ” said Aunt Maud, trying to clear the situation.

“ No . . . ” said Mr. Ridford, “ not exactly *ask* . . . ”

“ Then she *hinted* ! ” interrupted my father.

“ We’re always telling you, dear,” said my mother, “ that children *must not hint*.”

“ If you want it, *eat it*, and if you don’t want it, *leave it*,” said my father, a red note of anger in his voice, “ and don’t make such a fuss.”

My heart was thumping. Impossible now either to eat or to speak, for I realized that without any volition on my own part, almost without uttering a word, I had got myself into the middle of one of those inextricable knots which at times so confused my existence. Mr. Ridford bent down as if to say something more, but one glance at my face and he straightened up without speaking and went back to his place. I sat looking down at my plate, at that

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hateful brown object that lay in the middle of it. When my father got annoyed like that, what an extraordinary commotion seemed suddenly to start in one's inside : for an instant all one's machinery appeared to come to an absolute stop, and then, the next instant, everything was hammering and rushing, lumps from nowhere arriving in one's throat, blood hot enough to scorch the skin pouring into one's face, and, worst of all, a gush of tears clamouring to get out of one's eyes, tears which, once let fall, announced to all onlookers the complete wreckage of one's being. However, I had found from past experience that if one centred one's whole force on keeping these tears from escaping, if one was absolutely determined, it could just be done. I sat there being determined. . . . After a few moments, when the inside clamour was a little dying down, I stole a glance at Mr. Ridford. He was sitting silent. His usual expression of serene contentment had vanished, he looked not only puzzled but sad, actually unhappy. I had never before seen on anyone's face the suffering sympathy that springs from pure gentleness of heart. "Why, he is sorry for me," I thought, astounded ; "he sees

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the hole he's got me into, and he's sorry ! How *extraordinary* ! " I was filled with lovely bewilderment at my discovery, and on the instant my child-misery was healed.

But it was most unusual for Hilldrop's zephyr air to be disturbed by any incident as unpleasant as this. Neither as a rule at Hilldrop did my father trouble to exercise the discipline of home life. In fact, except for our morning and evening greeting, he hardly spoke to me.

2

Surrounding the upper lawn at Hilldrop was a dense shrubbery of laurel, so dense that as one pushed one's way into it one seemed to pass into a different world from the garden one, a close, intimate world of tiny arboreal vistas, of tangled twigs and leaves in whose depths a bird would suddenly scrimmage, startled by this child-intrusion. Here and there were patches of moss of lizard greenness, most pleasurable to lay one's hand upon, and sometimes one would find a wild strawberry plant with minute pallid strawberries dangling on

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their slender stalks, dwarfed fruits that had had , no chance of ripening in this secret, sun-excluded place. It would have been in just such a shrubbery, through which paths had been cut, that a Jane Austen heroine in her high-waisted muslin frock would have walked musing on a love affair gone wrong. But if there had ever been paths in the Hilldrop shrubberies they had become overgrown, and when Gerry and I decided to build a hut among the laurels it meant cutting a path as well.

Gerry was a boy cousin of about my own age who nearly always stayed at Hilldrop when I did ; and we did everything together. When Gerry was amused, a slow, a very slow smile would gradually creep into his clear, pale eyes, and then spread and spread till his whole fair-skinned face was one enchanted grin. It was our great-grandmother's smile over again ; only, unlike hers, it did not turn into something else half-way down. Gerry saw to the practical, the business side of our doings, I supplied the imaginative element. It was I who had first put forth the vague idea of having a little house of our own in the shrubbery ; it was Gerry who, after automatically cutting the

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• air for a few moments with a switch he was carrying, started on all the practical details as if our hut were a foregone conclusion. My imagination took fire. If we had a hut, then we could give a tea-party ! I saw that here was our first, our one chance of giving a party entirely on our own. My thoughts galloped. " I wonder if Rivage and Frederick would mind bringing the tea so far ? " I murmured.

" The *tea* ? " demanded Gerry, brought up short in his talk of the clinkers the path must be edged with, and the silver sand we would have to bring up from the farm. " Whatever are you . . . ? "

" Oh, nothing, nothing ! " I cried, twirling round on one toe ; " let's jump the flower-beds ! "

The circle of flower-beds was interesting to jump ; as, when one was quite small, one could only manage the narrow part close to the centre, but each year one was able to spring over a little nearer to the broadest end. Now, having satisfactorily done the circle without touching so much as the petal of one begonia, we ran joyfully jostling each other across the lawn and under an ornamental iron arch

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from which creepers dangled: for the Hilldrop garden was of the 'sixty-seventies, and no attempt had so far been made to change it. We dashed up a narrow gravel path, through a little door in the brick wall at the end of it, and then we stopped, for here was the central point, the very hub of the garden life.

We were in a stone-flagged corner of the kitchen garden, on one side a hot-house, on the other another open door that led to the potting-shed. It was a corner where fruit ripened hotly, where the morning sunshine seemed intensified, where butterflies hovered. In the flower-bed in the corner were pansies, mignonette, stocks, and verbenas; the air was a net-work of scent. There was something in the way the light fell in this little corner of the garden, something in the jolting sound made by the water-barrels on their rusty iron wheels as the gardeners pushed them over the flagstones, something in the way the glistening water slopped over from these barrels and fell wetting these flagstones and the green tufts that grew between — there was something in all this so airy-sweet, at once so casual and yet so reassuring, that even now at the memory of it my

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spirit is poised in delight.

But, "Come on," said Gerry, with the important manner which I loved because it made everything we did seem important, "Come on, we must get to work, we've a lot to do." And we were off again, this time along a little slithery path, walled by laurel, which led to the upper lawn. This, the upper lawn, had always played the part of outdoor nursery, chiefly, I imagine, because there was a summer-house at one side of it dear to the nurses. When I was smaller, my old nurse and the old Hilldrop nurse, Mrs. Turner — who still lived there though the children of the house were grown up — would sit side by side casketed in this summer-house like two ancient female images in a shrine. Their light summer dresses glimmered within its pillared recess. Sometimes one of them would come to the opening, and, hand supporting her against one of the slender pillars, shadow-pattern of creeper trembling across her skirt, would call out to one of us, "Come here, dear, you're getting so hot — come and sit in the shade with me for a bit!" An invitation that was never accepted.

Mrs. Turner was, by the time I knew her, a

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solidly handsome old woman with a face precisely like one of Sir Joshua's Waldegrave sisters grown old. To the elders of the family she was 'Turner,' but nursery etiquette demanded that visiting children should address her as 'Mrs. Turner.' She belonged in everything to a past, but not wholly departed, generation. Her progress through life had been one of stately rectitude; and she acted now as a sort of nursery hostess, the presiding spirit of the top floor. She lived up there in a big corner-room, impeccably neat, mending the household linen, washing out her little neck frills, taking little naps, eating her meals, reading the newspaper, or, very occasionally, what she called 'A Book.' She was a devout votary of the God of Order, the God of Respectability, the God of Neatness, the God of Politeness, the God of Conventionality, the God of Tradition. Her day was contentedly spent making little offerings on the altars of these, her tutelary deities, and then, her gods appeased, she would sit down and make herself underclothes of the most highly respectable character: underclothes encrusted with feather stitching, symmetrical with tucks, punctuated

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with buttons and button-holes. "Some day, Miss Dolly," she would say to me, "I'll teach you how to make a button-hole as a button-hole *should* be made." "Oh! Thank you!" I would say politely, but at heart I shuddered, for it was not only an indifferent eye which I cast upon all this display of stitchery and tuckery, but a hostile, an apprehensive eye. What if one day my educational path should lead me to such an unspeakable occupation? Even the thought of it made me blench.

My very early days at Hilldrop had been passed to the sound of a continuous flow of conversation between my nurse and Mrs. Turner. What would I not give now to have a dictaphone record of the stream of talk that then fell on my ears as indifferently as the sound of my nurse's needle as it pricked in and out of her work? How biased it must have been, how rich with family anecdote, how riddled with inhibitions, how saturated with "her Ladyship said to me" and "his Lordship wouldn't have liked that"; with what quaint distortions it must have mirrored the life of our families, the characteristics of the members of these families — all served up, with the rich

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sauce of nursery snobbery.

I can't help thinking that at times Mrs. Turner must have considered that my nurse did not worship with sufficient zeal at the altars at which she herself sacrificed. Mary, for instance, had a son called Tom, who, when in need of money, would emit a piercing whistle in the street below my nursery windows. "There's Tom come for some money!" my nurse would exclaim, and with a little air of excitement would go toddling out of the room. Why Tom chose such a peculiar method of announcing his arrival was one of those small mysteries with which Mary liked to heighten the interest of life. Another of these mysteries was her constant reference to all the grand things she would buy "when her ship came home." Never having seen either Tom or her ship, in a small child's inchoate manner I connected them with each other, and in my mind visualized a ship coming into harbour loaded with 'riches,' and Tom, a gay nautical figure such as I had seen in picture books, dancing a hornpipe on board with snapping fingers and golden earrings. This picture was effaced for ever when one day my nurse actually ushered

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Tom into the nursery, and I saw a little, shabby fellow, far from young, who seemed decidedly ill at ease in the nursery atmosphere. Requested to whistle, with a sheepish air he turned his eyes to the ceiling, and gave a very indifferent performance. "You whistle much louder in the street," I gently reproved him. "This ain't the street, Miss," he whispered huskily. This seemed to me so obvious that I could not imagine why he said it. "Better be coming along now, Tom," said my nurse, and he was hurried out, leaving a very poor impression behind him.

Impossible to imagine Mrs. Turner possessing a son called Tom who when in financial straits would announce the fact by whistling to her from the street. Actually there had never been any question of Mrs. Turner having a son, as she was really Miss Turner, having passed all her life bringing up the very young of the rich. Before she came to Hilldrop she had been with some of the Manners Suttons in Australia, and would often tell us the story of their little boy who when in bed with fever with a high temperature was only allowed occasionally to eat a small piece of bread and

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butter. Becoming very hungry on this diet he, one day, after devouring his single slice, begged Mrs. Turner to bring back the plate, "as he thought there were a few crumbs left." This incident was always told us with all the impressiveness at her command as the extreme of human tragedy, and it was solemnly accepted by us as such.

To attain, so it appeared, a greater social prestige, Mrs. Turner kept herself almost entirely aloof from the other servants. The reasons that had finally decided her on this self-chosen segregation in her top room were complex, involved, and, to my unwilling ears, interminable, but, once she had started on her tirade, politeness forced me to stay and listen till she had said her piece. "And so," she would at last conclude, folding her hands with their clean, clean nails over her little black silk apron, "And so, *I do not mix!*"

"Yes, I expect much better not!" I would cry, not having an idea what to say, and sidling out of the room with as much alacrity as good manners allowed.

As a matter of fact, one had to be extremely careful what one did say to her, and our diver-

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gent views on the Great Bear, for instance, jarred our friendship for a considerable time. One day she had promised me that the next night she would show me that celestial animal. Never so much as having heard of it I was struck with astonishment.

“A *bear*? In the *sky*? ”

“Yes, a bear in the sky, a bear made of stars ! ”

I was quite excited. ‘A bear made by a mass of glittering stars ! How lovely it would look ! The evening came. Mrs. Turner led me into an unlit room and drew back the curtains. “Look ! ” she said, “there it is . . . those stars up there ! ”

“*Those* stars ? ”

“Yes, those up there are its head, and then those below make its body.”

“*Those* stars ! But they don’t make anything at all ! Why, it’s not the *least* like a bear ! ”

To say that that handful of stars made a bear, or, in fact, to pretend that they made any animal at all, struck me as so ridiculous that I burst out laughing. There was the sound of a door being very softly shut. I looked round,

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and found myself alone. I rushed after her full of abject apologies. My stammerings were received in silence. But her manner ! It was only too evident that my conduct had given the God of Politeness an absolute slap in the face. But though I was genuinely sorry to have so wounded her, the question why she should have been wounded at all was one to which I could find no answer. At last I propounded the riddle to Aunt Flora.

“ Poor dear Turner,” she exclaimed. “ You must have hurt her feelings most dreadfully ! ”

“ But *why* . . . I can’t understand *why* ? ”

“ Of course, dear, because you laughed at her bear.”

“ But it wasn’t *her* bear — *she* didn’t make it.”

“ Don’t be silly, dear. As if Turner could have made the stars ! What odd things you children do say ! ”

“ No, I know she didn’t make the stars, so why should she mind ? ”

“ I’ve already told you, dear — because you hurt her feelings.”

“ But . . . but . . . ” My mind jibbed at making the point clearer, and Aunt Flora

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turned back to her accounts. It was not till many years later, when I realized how closely an uneducated mind associates itself with its few acquired facts, that my question was answered.

This talk with Aunt Flora took place the morning after the Great Bear fiasco, when I had just run into the house for a glass of water. It was curious to pass from the seething glare outside into the cool, half-darkened house. As for me, I revelled in the outside glare. But not so the grown-ups. They detested the sun, they feared it, it was their inveterate enemy. Every day in the summer there was a fight between the sun on one side and the grown-ups, armed with a multiplicity of blinds, and brocade curtains padded and lined, on the other. In spite of all this upholstery at their command, often the sun would win, darting in his dazzling snakes of light sideways. This battle continued all day. Those rows of down-drawn blinds at Hilldrop battened against the sunlight! Aunt Flora's rushes at them if anyone dared to draw them up even a few inches! This daily scrimmage with the sun, and her onslaughts on flies and wasps, were, during the summer months,

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Aunt Flora's chief physical activities. Her adroitness in killing insects was remarkable. The Cabinet room, in which the women of the party chiefly sat, and into which, as on this morning, I would occasionally wander, would be filled with somnolent peace ; in the dimmed light here and there a figure reading or writing. Then suddenly, without making a sound Aunt Flora would be seen cautiously pushing herself back in her satinwood chair away from her Carlton House writing-table ; without a sound she would rise ; without a sound creep towards the window. In her upraised hand would be a small piece of folded blotting-paper . . . a small, deadened *thud*. . . Everyone in the room would look up. The blotting paper was being firmly pressed by Aunt Flora's beringed fingers against the window jamb. If one happened to be quite close one might even hear a tiny, but most sickening, scrunch come from behind it.

"*Got him !*" would come Aunt Flora's glad cry. "An enormous bluebottle ! Horrid creature — I've had my eye on him all day." Sometimes in her exultation she would walk round the room holding out the blotting-paper

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for us to see her flattened victim, disgorged entrails lying by his side.

"It was only an old piece of blotting-paper," Aunt Flora would say apologetically as she pushed the blind to one side, and, with the help of an ivory paper-knife, shunted the corpse onto the window-sill outside. Then squeezing up the bit of blotting-paper with the tips of her fingers she would throw it in her rubbish basket. This, her own special rubbish basket, was a very exquisite affair made of black wicker with a row of hanging pink wool bobbles round the top, which matched the pink satin lining.

"Couldn't you just squig up the blotting-paper with the bluebottle inside," I asked her one day, "and throw it straight into the rubbish basket; it would be so much simpler."

"Oh, *no* dear . . . not into my rubbish basket! . . . oh no! . . . it might smell . . . that wouldn't be at *all* nice."

Any time passing along the terracè one would see Aunt Flora's flung forth victims growing dry and brittle on the sun-scorched stone.

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walls were lined with glass cupboards. These cupboards were filled with china, and among the Lowestoft and Rockingham tea-sets, the Bow and Bristol figures, stood a Sèvres mug said to have been used by Napoleon on his campaigns. The contrast of the clear magenta of this cup with the muted colouring of a medallion of Napoleon that ornamented one side of it filled me with pleasure. Whenever I happened to be near that particular cabinet the Buonaparte mug drew my eyes. In the evening, when the blinds were pulled up, the park, the deer, and the setting sun would be reflected in these glass doors, and there within this confused mirror one would see a fallow deer moving across the tea-cups, and, enmeshed within the branches of an elm, Napoleon bearing his part in this tranquil English scene.

3

There must, I suppose, have been wet days during the summer holidays at Hilldrop but, actually, I cannot remember a single one. It may have been on these supposititious wet days that Uncle Reggie had out his toy engine ; not

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for us to play with ; it was far too expensive, also far too dangerous for that : Uncle Reggie's engine was a grown-up toy, an engine of importance. All the male members of the family were pressed into the service of laying down the rails — which were heavy. In this Adam house the billiard-room, drawing-rooms, hall, library, and dining-room all opened out of each other : when all the double mahogany doors were thrown back there was revealed a charming landscape of room beyond room, the whole length suffused with streams of light from the windows at one side. But when the rails were all down, crossing every room, running through every doorway, it gave a most desolate look. But still that was not the point ; the point was to make the engine go, and for such an extremely grand and impressive toy I must say I never saw anything that demanded so much inducement, that necessitated so many people to attend to it, before it could be persuaded to perform. It appeared to require not only the encouraging presence of the entire family but that too of Randall, the carpenter (who was always sent for on engine-days as a matter of course), before it could be persuaded

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so much as to stir. The amount of discussion, tapping, screw-turning, adjustment, and re-adjustment that polished brass and green-enamelled object required! Matches were lit . . . blown out . . . further matches lit . . . the smell of methylated spirits impregnated the air. The attendant family got tired of waiting . . . it seemed as if nothing would ever happen . . . as if there would never be any other show to look'at than that of the two bending, arguing figures of my uncle and the carpenter hiding the engine from our view. And then suddenly there would be a cry, "She's off!" There would be a fizzing and a puffing, and actually, yes, actually, there was the little creature moving along the rails of its own accord . . . beginning to go quite quickly . . . quicker . . . now really fast; and my uncle, flushed with success, and brandishing a walking stick (which he used for poking into the engine's tender when he wanted it to stop) would run along by its side, occasionally, for some strategic purpose, vaulting over the rails. The whole family, headed by Aunt Flora crying out, "Splendid, dear Reggie, splendid!" would try to rush after him. I say try'because,

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being so many, there was generally a jam at the doorways. Mr. Ridford, I noticed, never saw much, being over-polite at doorways if he was with the crowd, or, if set to look after a point or signal, so conscientious that he never stirred from his post.

Uncle Reggie, meanwhile, by his leaps over the rails, invariably got left behind by the engine which, now at the height of its form, would rush from room to room, a terrifying demon that no one of us dared interfere with for fear — as was constantly impressed on us — that it would either explode, burn one's fingers, or set the house on fire. For us it was this very diabolic quality that was the engine's charm; the delicious feeling at the back of our mind that anything might happen at any moment. "Oh, Uncle Reggie — what's that funny noise it's making? Is it going to explode?"

"*Get off the rails, dear child! Get off the rails.*" And then, seeing the engine was nearing a side line on to which she was to be shunted, "Quick, Harry, she's coming — quick, quick — the points!" To see all the grown-ups so excited seemed very odd. It

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made one wonder whether at bottom they were, really so very different from oneself as one had imagined.

There was one splendid occasion when, some kneeling male having failed to adjust the points in time, the engine dashed on to the wrong line and tore headlong for the Circular room at the end of the house where, as we all knew, the railway line came abruptly to an end, and if not stopped in time it would mean that the engine would precipitate itself among the chair legs and the valances of that treasured room. Never had I imagined my uncle could run so fast. As he ran he shouted. We all ran : we all shouted. It was a perfect moment . . . but, alas, the engine was caught just in time.

4

Every day Gerry and I worked steadily at making our hut and the path that was to lead up to it. He did the hacking of the laurels, I, chiefly, the carting away of the rubbish. This suited me exactly, as, wheelbarrow, jiggeting behind, I could imagine myself now one horse

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in the stables, now another. If I started jibbing or rearing, or suddenly shied, Gerry, who at a glance always took in any situation, would at once announce in correct stable language the alteration in bit or feeding necessary to put a stop to such behaviour. This enchanted me. Everything in the building of Evergreen Arbour enchanted me : everything in the garden was a delight. The exciting, stuffy pressure of warmth in the hot-houses ; the individual clicks of the various garden gates ; the passing figures of gardener or relation, all, at a word or a request, instinct with kindness. If it were Uncle Reggie who passed by it would always be : " Well, Dolly, and how are *you* getting on ? " And my answer was invariably : " Oh, *splendidly*, Uncle Reggie."

It was just this sense at once of freedom and yet of people all the time moving about in house and garden that to me was so satisfactory. Was I happy ? Was I content ? The words are too pale. I was a child Eve in a Wiltshire garden of Eden.

All the time I was pottering at work over the hut I was aware in a vague subconscious way of the cradling softness of the garden

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atmosphere around me : of the sunlight that soundlessly shifted and changed with the moving hours : of the flowers' starred faces bared unflinchingly to the sky as they stood tranced in their own secret, self-sufficing world : all this was the accustomed silent accompaniment to our garden life. But one day I was stung to a deeper awareness. I had been prancing along with the wheelbarrow behind me, spade and trowel jingling inside, when I suddenly pranced too high (*Comet out exercising on Monday morning, therefore extra fresh*) and the barrow, giving a lurch, crashed over. I stood for a moment smiling with pleasure at such an amusing disaster. Barrow, spade, and trowel together had made a good clatter as they fell, and, now that the clatter was over, I became aware of the garden's sun-embraced stillness. I found I was standing in front of a carelessly grown border of flowers and flowering shrubs, a fretted dazzle of light and muted light, leaves sombre in shadow, greenly glittering where caught by the sun, here and there so illumined that they shone like little pieces of emerald glass. An immense buddleia sprayed forth its fountain of long tapering cones, mulleins' misty

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spikes pierced the air, thick-clustered with yellow blossom, while at their foot marigolds made orange discs in the green. The mulleins' great wrinkled leaves seemed as if afloat in transparent shadow, shadow so glaucous that it was as if one were looking at them through clear, dark water. It seemed as if a screen had been suddenly rolled aside, as if for the first time I saw clearly. Beauty smote me with a blow of love. For a moment my mind slid within the depths of that flower-scented place and became one with it. . . . Then the screen slowly slid back. The shrubs and flowers became again merely the usual surround to my blissful Hildrop life, and I was simply standing in front of them dawdling away my time when Gerry was waiting for the spade and trowel. I picked up the wheelbarrow, and the next moment Comet was showing his paces in the most approved manner.

At five minutes to one the first, the warning, luncheon bell came ringing from the house across the lawns. To wait till we heard this was cutting it fine ; it meant only four minutes to wash and tidy up, and when that plangent sound fell on our ears, without exchanging a

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word we would start hurling things into the wheelbarrow . . . a brief: "Got everything?" from Gerry and we were off at a rush.

How lovely it was to one's cat-like body to run! The consciousness of one's flung out legs and strenuous hips . . . the subtle sense to one's rubber-soled feet of the different substances they touched . . . the change from earth to gravel, from gravel to asphalt, from asphalt to cinder, from cinder to grass, each had its own charm; but, of all substances, grass, a mown lawn hard with summer's heat, was the best.

This frantic rush across the garden in answer to the bell was one of the things I liked best in the day . . . I have only to shut my eyes, and I am back there now . . . the lawn, broadly banded with lighter and darker green from the morning's mowing, stretches before me as I run . . . run. . . . Behind me come sounds of a wildly shoved-along wheelbarrow, and of Gerry shouting . . . the air is nectar-pure upon my face, the sky clear midday blue; all around are suspended glittering banners of green. The outspread beds of begonias and geraniums are all ablaze as I tear by. A white

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butterfly, poised in the sunshined air, suddenly flies towards me, encircles me as I run, whirls, twirls, and wafts away. There on the lawn is Mr. Ridford sitting reading as usual in his deck chair. "The bell! the bell!" I cry, suddenly emboldened by the sense of swiftly rushing by him, by the fact that he is, and I am not, going to be late. He flings his book to the ground and leaps to his feet. "I'll get to the house first!" he shouts, and is after me. (*Get to the house first! Let him try!*) But now I am so shaking with laughter I can scarcely run. Soundlessly in his canvas shoes he gains on me, comes alongside: "Oh! you're no good at all!" he cries, and, gripping my elbow, runs me along with him, laughing, laughing, into the cool and darkened house.

PART IV

AFTERNOON AT HILLDROP

EACH TIME OF THE DAY AT HILLDROP HAD its own special feel and texture, and none more so than the quarter of an hour after luncheon when the grown-ups dawdled about before returning to their day-long and, to my mind, unspeakably dreary occupations.

But for this short time we all idled in company. The dining-room doors open, we straggled into the library, and through library to hall. Here, in the centre of the stone floor, was a great square rug, and this rug had given rise to the game of Goats. To play Goats you crossed your arms on your chest to make your body compact, and then, hopping on one leg, tried to butt, push, hustle your opponent, also on one leg, off the square of carpet. This after-luncheon interlude was the great time for Goats. Gerry and I adored it. We charged, we shoved, we squealed. The laughter and

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cheers of the grown-ups were spurs to our excitement.

“ Oh, Aunt Flora,” I cried one day, rushing up to her, “ why don’t you come and play too — it’s simply heavenly ! ”

“ Thank you, dear, I’d rather digest my luncheon.”

(Digest her luncheon ! . . . well, really . . . !)

But within a short time the grown-ups were sauntering away, returning to their writing-tables, their newspapers, their embroidery-frames. “ *Now*, dears ! ” my mother would say to Gerry and me, and lead the way to the drawing-room. Arrived there, Gerry and I flung ourselves flat on our backs on the floor, and my mother began to read aloud. The idea was rest and instruction combined. Most soothing and pleasant it was to lie there in the dimmed light vaguely listening to my mother’s beautiful reading voice, idly tracing with my eyes the pattern of mediæval birds and flowers on the chintz valance within a few inches of my face. Sweet half-drowsing moments, a pause, a little suspended space between the joys of the morning from which one’s heart had scarcely yet ceased to pant, and the further

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joys awaiting one in the glowing garden beyond the windows. . . . Now, perhaps, the momentary passing of a gardener and wheelbarrow along the stone terrace outside, the grundle-squeak of the wheel competing for a few seconds with my mother's gentle voice ; then the wheelbarrow sound changing as it passes on to the gravel path beyond . . . then fading away altogether . . . and my mother's words again falling distinctly on one's ear.

.

The reading was over. We ran into the hall. " Here, dears ! I'll hold the blind up for you ! " Aunt Flora would say, hurrying after us out of the Cabinet room, and with small cries and exclamations would manœuvre the blind that hung over the garden door. Once out on the terrace the heat was so fierce it seemed to hit one. " Oh," I cried, shutting my eyes and holding my arms wide for sheer pleasure at the scorch. " Pheugh ! " said Gerry. The house stood solid behind us, the drawn blinds everywhere giving it a shut-eyed look : it seemed extraordinary that it could stand there so calmly in this blare of heat without melting. We turned in the inevitable

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direction. In this early afternoon light the garden lay outspread all a-shimmer. An enchantment of stillness lay over it, and one felt on every side the presence of layer on layer of green leaves: leaves of every shade: leaves hanging in motionless tassels and cascades from the trees: leaves massed into dense bushes into whose depths one could thrust one's hand and feel the cool caress of the fluttering green tongues on one's bare arm. There were butterflies everywhere, far more than in the morning, zig-zagging, hovering, darting, looking like escaped flower-petals blown up in the air.

"We must get some more clinkers up from the farm," said Gerry briskly, "we've not got nearly enough to border the pathway yet."

Once more we set ourselves to our self-imposed, our absorbing work.

One day after luncheon, instead of my mother reading aloud, Mr. Ridford arranged to take a photograph of the whole party with his new camera which had just arrived. He was walking about the hall displaying his new

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possession, full of enthusiasm over this group photograph. He wanted us to be taken on the steps outside the billiard-room's double garden-doors, which, at this time of day, were in shadow. It was settled, as being less tiring for her, that my great-grandmother should follow later when everything was arranged. We were ready to start. Mr. Ridford held open the terrace-door, and everyone began to go out, following each other one by one like the sheep going through the gate that I had been told to think of when I lay awake. But, "Come back! Come back!" called out my uncle, who had just come into the hall, "don't go *that* way round, you'll all get sunstroke!" Back came the sheep . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four. "Yes, how silly of us!" cried Aunt Flora, "we ought to go the *other* way of course." Egress of the family through the front door. In the quadrangle by the side of the house lay a great block of shadow, and through this shadow the family troupe passed. It was odd to see all these familiar faces, these familiar shapes of head and hair precipitated out of doors at this hour of the day, as if the house, in whose cool caverns of rooms they

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so loved to hide, had suddenly and cruelly belched them forth defenceless into the afternoon glare.

We arrived at the steps in front of the billiard-room glass-doors.

"Now do, everyone," cried Aunt Flora, "be careful of the cactus!" And one certainly had to be careful of those two gigantic cacti, standing one each side of the steps in a tub, each a mass of outstretched green arms, each green arm ribbed with spikes of a ferocity that asked for blood.

"Now then!" cried Mr. Ridford gaily. We all tried to place ourselves within the shadow, but this only just took in the steps, and the top step was so narrow from the doors being shut that no one could stand on it. "We must open the doors," said Aunt Flora. A man cousin seized the door handle, turned it, shook it. Nothing happened. "Locked!" said everyone. "I'll get the key," cried Gerry, and was off in a second.

"*Remember the cactus!*" cried Aunt Flora.

"The boy won't know where the key is," exclaimed Uncle Reggie, and he too disappeared.

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As many of us as could get into the shadow, stood there pressed together, waiting.

There was a scrabbling the other side of the doors. We all turned. My uncle inside was struggling with key and handle. Aunt Flora drummed with her fingers on the glass. "Pull up the blind, Reggie!" she shrilled, "pull up the blind!"

With a burst one door was wrenched back, then the other. There was a faint cheer. The corners of the doors were hitching the blind up all awry. "I *knew* that would happen," cried Aunt Flora; "here, let me do it, dear . . . take care, oh, take care — you'll tear it."

"Now," said Mr. Ridford, addressing us from the lawn and smiling round benevolently, "I want to take a little trouble over the grouping, so that we shall all have a really nice photograph to keep as a little memento of this summer."

(All like to keep? Was I to get one then?)

"Now then," Mr. Ridford went on, coming up to the group, "if you will allow me . . ." and, smiling and genial, he began to pose and arrange us, to repose and to rearrange, alternating with sudden rushes to his camera on the

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lawn so as to peer at us. This arranging took time, as the already posed were apt, after a few moments, to start talking in a low voice to someone near them, and to get turned the wrong way round. But Mr. Ridford's good-humour never faltered.

"*There !*" he cried at last, backing away from us with uplifted hand, "that's splendid . . . !" He stood looking at us and smiling, running his eye over us individually : but as his eye ran his face grew puzzled. From my place on a rug in the front I could hear him murmuring : "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ." and then, "It's very peculiar," he called out, "but when we started there were fifteen in the group, and now there are only thirteen !"

"How very odd !" said one voice.

"It's impossible," said another voice.

"But it's what's happened !" grinned Mr. Ridford.

One of the men standing in a row at the back turned and peered into the room behind. "*Oh !*" he cried accusingly, "so *that's* where you are !"

Two women cousins came to the doorway.

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"Oh dear! has it begun?" they asked, looking embarrassed, "We were just having a little talk — we didn't know it had really *started*!"

"Shame! Shame!" laughed someone. Mr. Ridford came forward and put us all tidy again.

"*Now* then . . ." he said hopefully, and returned to his camera.

At this moment Rivage's voice, low but insistent, was heard from the back of the group. "Please, my lord. Please, my lord." Uncle Reggie turned round. Rivage murmured some message. Uncle Reggie cried over our heads, "One moment, Ridford." He and Rivage disappeared into the depths of the billiard-room. Gerry, who was sitting in front with me, jumped up to stretch himself. "The cactus — oh, be careful!" ejaculated Aunt Flora. Someone yawned. Someone said, "Now sit down, Gerry, and then we'll all be ready when Uncle Reggie comes back." Someone said, "The light's beginning to change."

My uncle reappeared. "Here I am!" he cried. Mr. Ridford beamed. He bent smiling over his camera: he peered in at its little window.

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“Excellent!” he said, “couldn’t be better!” He looked up, “Well, now . . .” he began, when: “*Wait!*” cried Aunt Flora; jumping up from her chair in the middle row. “*Wait!*”

“Whatever’s the matter?” cried half a dozen voices.

“*We’ve forgotten Granny!*” The consternation and reproof in her voice were so overwhelming that all of us who were sitting instinctively stood up. Mr. Ridford came hurrying forward. “How disgraceful of me . . . I’ll go and fetch her at once.” And he went round the corner at a run.

“Bring her through the billiard-room — *not outside!*” Aunt Flora called after him.

“I don’t think he heard,” said Aunt Maud.

“I’ll go and tell him,” exclaimed Gerry, jumping up.

“The *cactus!*” cried Aunt Flora.

“It’ll be quicker if I catch him through the billiard-room,” I said. This sounded so well that everyone made room for me. I was passed through the group, and rushed into the billiard-room. Should I or Gerry catch Mr. Ridford first? What fun! You take the high road and

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I take the low. Now I was at the drawing-room's double doors. I wrenched them open ; then came the inner ones. Need I shut them ? No. In a crisis like this they could be left. I fled across the room. Two more double doors. Oh, these doors ! I found myself in the Cabinet room confronted by Mr. Ridford, Gerry, and my great-grandmother. Then Gerry had won ! I was so disappointed that for the moment I quite forgot what I'd come for. My great-grandmother was protesting.

"No, no ! You take your photograph without me. No, no, an old woman like me — it's folly ! "

But in the end she was persuaded. Trailing her black skirt across the pale Aubusson carpet she walked on in front. Following behind I noticed how beautifully she walked, in an aloof, collected way, as she did everything.

Once arrived at the group the question arose, where was she to be placed ? While this was under discussion she stood with her faintly contemptuous smile, murmuring at intervals : "How silly it all is . . . what folly ! "

"We must have a chair for her, of course," said Aunt Flora, "how stupid of us not to have

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thought of it before she came ! ”

A chair was brought out. By now the whole party had got out of position. Everyone's mind was taken up with the problem as to how the chair could be propped up on the centre step. “ A stool beneath the front part,” suggested Mr. Ridford. He brought out two stools . . . three stools . . . four stools. “ There,” he said, hot but pleased, “ that's as firm as a rock ! ” My great-grandmother was led to her chair. We tried to retake our positions as before. “ Oh ! don't bother,” said Mr. Ridford, “ the great thing after all is for everyone to get into the photograph.”

“ Yes,” said my uncle, “ the great point is to go on and get the thing done.”

Aunt Flora cleared her throat. “ It will be very *nice*,” she said, “ to have a good photograph of the whole family.”

Mr. Ridford took up his post on the lawn : peered again into his camera. “ Why, I do believe,” said Aunt Maud, “ it's going to rain ! ” Hands were put out ; faces turned skywards. “ Why, it *is* ! ” we all cried. The sky was as blue as ever, the sun was shining, and yet, without a doubt, the rain was falling

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. . . falling . . . quicker and harder every moment. "Granny must go in at once!" cried Aunt Flora. Hands were outstretched to my great-grandmother, she was helped up, propelled into the billiard room, and we all followed. For the moment everyone seemed to have forgotten Mr. Ridford. Then my uncle went back to the door.

"Better come in, Ridford," he called, "the photograph must be taken another day."

.

Within a few minutes the rain was over. Gerry and I raced out through the door. The steps were dark and slithery with wet; every blade and petal and leaf glistened.

"Come on!" cried Gerry.

We tore along the slippery gravel path. I brushed against the leaves of a holly tree, and a shower of waterdrops shook down.

"Take care of the cactus!" shouted Gerry. I began to laugh. The relief of rushing about after sitting still, an excited feeling because the garden which had before been dry was now wet, the idea that we were being irresistibly witty, all these mingled in our minds so that we shot about like two lunatics,

. . .

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charging into every dripping tree we came to, crying out to each other: "The cactus — oh, be careful of the cactus!"

2

"*All idly on a summer's day*," I sang, and picking off a leaf from the Virginian creeper that covered the stable wall I held it up to see it glow red in the light.

In the afternoon Gerry had to do an hour's work with Mr. Ridford: and while this was in progress I hung about waiting for him to come out. Hence my presence alone in the quadrangle: hence my loitering.

I put my hands on my hips and did a double shuffle across the gravel . . . fun the way the little pebbles scuffled under one's feet! "*All idly on a summer's day*," I sang again. But why had that line come into my head? Where had it come from? I stopped shuffling to think about it, and as I stood there I became aware of the lovely afternoon silence, not the silence of isolation but the suspended silence that enwrapped Hilldrop between the comings and

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goings of the morning and the reawakening, about tea-time. So shining blue the sky above the firm line of roof, so pure, so clear the air one seemed almost afloat in it. And if one listened right into this silence, shutting one's eyes, and listening as carefully as if one's ear were against a shell, then one could hear gentle, far-off sounds . . . a voice singing somewhere in the kitchen part of the servants' wing, but a voice shut off by several doors so that it came faintly, faintly . . . wheels of a cart going across a field. Curious! One heard them . . . then one did not hear them . . . and then again would come that distant churning grind . . . and now, somewhere in the very heart of the house, a gush of water from a tap plashing into a pail . . . and then suddenly, cutting stridently across these muted sounds, the clattering clogs of a stableman as he crossed the cobbles on the further side of the quadrangle, his noisy entrance through a stable door, the bang of the door . . . and then again the brooding afternoon silence. . . .

“*All idly on a summer's day.*” I wandered across the grass to an open window that gave on to the stone passage leading to the pantry.

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Ah! the paint had blistered on the sill! I smiled with anticipation. I placed my fingertip gently on a large bubble of ginger paint and pressed. Pop! What before had been a bump had turned to a tiny heap of flaked paint. Good! These blisters popped well. A voice fell on my ear: "Well, go out if you want to then," said the voice. I turned to look. One of the sand-coloured doors in the servants' wing had been opened a few inches to let out Timmy, the white Persian. Stiffly and compactly, white plume tail slowly waving, neat paws soundlessly treading, he stepped forth on to the grass. He stood there surveying the quadrangle, the sunshine, and myself. At least, I did hope those amber eyes took in myself, for, to say the truth, friendship with Timmy was a precarious affair. One's greeting was invariably met with indifference, any further advances generally with resentment.

I would try again. "*Timmy*, darling?" I said uncertainly, and approached with caution. His little cat face looked up at me, his white-fur mouth opened to emit a minute cry. I was entranced. Obviously unhappy and in need of sympathy! This time I should not be repulsed.

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I leant down and picked him up. He lay on his back ; his tail intermittingly giving my elbow a furry flick. The feel of his heavy, sagging body against my bare arms was adorable, all thick fur outside, and all limpness within. The innocent way his hind legs stuck up in the air smote my heart. How odd his eyes were when you could look right down into them like this : two little pieces of lemon-coloured glass sunk each side of the flat nose, in the centre of each eye a black slit like an exclamation-mark. I gazed at the microscopic hairs on his nose, trying to see when they gave up being hairs and became nose. His ears twitched. Should I venture to kiss the one near my face ? Vain hope. In one instant the quiescent body had turned to struggling steel. . . . Ugh ! How nasty to be holding on to something that writhed and wriggled like that. . . . I loosened my grip. With horrid ferocity and shooting claws he leapt down and bounded away. My body drew together in a shudder. *Ugh !* This sudden rebuttal of amity, this startling transformation of limpness into fury gave one a queer feeling all over : it had bruised something gentle within me : had

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made a rent in the smiling afternoon.

I wandered to the porch and began to jump on and off the low step between the pillars: Could I do it on one foot? With hand on column at one side perhaps. But the moment I pressed my hand on the stone pillar the gritty feel of it caught my attention. My hand with outspread fingers looked like a pink starfish against the grey stone: the feel of the massiveness of the pillar pressed through my palm, through my finger-tips, into my mind: there crept into me the realization of the strength, the solidity of the whole house built round the courtyard, and with it there came to me the sense of my own body, so small, flexible, and soft in comparison, skin so easily torn, blood spurting out at any careless contact . . . it was a sudden and passing instant of self-realization, a fugitive intimation of adolescence. In a vague way all this touched my mind, then drifted away again. "*All idly on a summer's day,*" I sang, and hopping on to the door-step I clasped the door's ivory handle and began to swing from side to side as I trilled. Ah! this was amusing . . . but the handle was being turned from the other side. I dropped back. Uncle Reggie came out,

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a bundle of papers under his arm. "Coming in, Dolly?" he asked in his kind way, holding the door back with his arm. "No thank you, Uncle Reggie," I said, and at once thought how silly it must seem to be hanging on to the handle and yet not wanting to come in. Somehow directly one came into contact with a grown-up so many things that before had seemed quite natural to do suddenly became idiotic. But, as so often happened, Uncle Reggie's question had slipped from his mind before I had answered it. He was sorting through his papers. "*There it is!*" he exclaimed and drawing out a sheet put it in his pocket. Then, "All going well with you, Dolly?" he called out as he hurried off.

"Oh! *splendidly*, Uncle Reggie."

I watched him go, then, flinging my arms wide, I twirled round and round on one toe. I was good at this, and often put in a little practice at odd moments. The secret of success, so I had found, was to shut one's eyes as one did it. But a voice was calling me from the garden: Gerry's voice. I stopped twirling and opened my eyes. There he was, standing waving to me the other side of the white gate.

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I ran towards the gate, that most lovely double gate, the top line curving downwards in anti-thesis to the up-springing curve of the stone arch above, a gate so exquisitely made and balanced that at a touch it seemed to open of itself; above all, a gate that with the softest possible click as it closed together gently shut one in to the world of leaves, of butterflies, and of flowers.

"Look," said Gerry, as I came up to him.
"Look, there's a bumble-bee!"

A foxglove was being shaken as roughly as if an invisible hand were doing it. It gave one an unpleasant feeling to see that bustling, fat body crawl into the cool, secret places of the flower.

"I do wish," I said, "it wouldn't crawl right inside the flower like that."

"Has to," said Gerry briefly, "got to get the honey."

3

When Evergreen Arbour was actually made, when the estate carpenter had helped to put up the wattles that formed its walls and roof, and

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nailed up canvas to cover the wattles inside, then came the unique afternoon when Gerry and I gave our tea-party. The fact that we could give a tea-party there at all proved to us that our hut was really a hut, even almost a sort of house, in so far as from it invitations could be issued, and to it the invited could come.

Our guests were to be the house-party only. The hut would not hold more. I felt that unless the grown-ups actually wrote their acceptances the party would be merely a sham affair; therefore, I put in capitals at the foot of each invitation: "Please write — don't speak." It looked a little odd, but I couldn't think how else to word it, and the result fulfilled my hopes. Every single member of the family wrote accepting properly on the Hilldrop notepaper. That made fourteen letters, or, to be strictly accurate, fifteen, for as we had asked Aunt Flora to bring her little white and brown terrier, Vic, with her, she wrote me an extra note purporting to be from Vic herself. "Miss Vic accepts, etc. etc." Privately I thought this rather childish, and not treating the party with that grown-up seriousness

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which was my earnest desire : but still, it made one more letter. I carried these letters about with me all day in the front of my dress, and at intervals when no one was looking I would stand and draw them out, reading them carefully one by one, examining and re-examining the different handwritings, the different signatures, the different way the writers worded their acceptances. Then, counting them all through to make certain that none was missing, I would shove them back in my dress and set off at a run to give vent to my lilt of excitement.

The morning of the actual day was passed by Gerry and me in a frenzy of preparation. Finally it struck him that a few pictures on our sacking walls would add to the effect. He rushed to the house, and came back with three large framed photographs of his school. With some difficulty we nailed them up. "There," said Gerry gravely as he surveyed them one on each wall — for the hut had only three sides — "I think that looks extremely nice." I gazed at Mr. Ridford and three other masters sitting almost submerged by rows of little boys in school caps. An idea struck me. "Won't

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Mr. Ridford think it rather *odd* to see three , photographs of himself ? ” I asked.

Gerry stood for a moment looking thoughtfully at the largest group. “No,” he said at last, “ I think he’ll take it as a compliment.”

I was completely nonplussed. How could a photograph be a compliment ? Surely a compliment was something said ? I opened my mouth to ask for enlightenment, when through the bushes came the first warning note of the luncheon bell. “ Shall have to finish tidying afterwards,” snapped Gerry, hurling things into the wheelbarrow.

That day, as we often did, we shared the wash-basin in my room. As my hand dived for the soap the joy of this day of days rose within me. “ Oh ! ” I cried, “ I feel . . . I feel . . . , ” my eye fell on the brass hot-water can at my elbow, “ I feel as if I’d like to fling the can over my head I’m so happy ! Do *you* ever feel like that, Gerry ? ”

“ No — never,” said Gerry shortly, and grasping the towel he began to dry each finger in a competent manner.

The sense of check, of disappointment at my bubble of excitement not being shared is

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what makes me remember the minute incident. As clearly as if I were standing there now, I can see the brassy glitter of the can, the billowing clouds of a water-colour by Copley Fielding that hung over the washstand, while in my ear sounds the warning note of the second luncheon-bell just beginning to ring. "

It was half-past three. I was running from garden to house for the last time, on my way to my room to put on my party frock, when I saw a procession coming towards me across the lawn. I drew my breath, and stood waiting. First came Rivage carrying the large silver tea-tray crowded with pink cups and saucers, and silver milk and cream jugs : next Frederick, the first footman, with a big tray smothered with plates of cakes, and scones, and sandwiches, and after him the second footman with a folded tea-table. As he walked one of the folded sides of this table went flap at each step he took . . . flap . . . flap . . . flap. Of course I knew the men-servants would have to carry the tea up to the hut ; equally I knew what cakes we were going to have, for Gerry and I had been

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allowed to choose them, but when I actually saw this procession, when I actually saw that familiar silver tea-tray, those familiar pink and gold china cups, not in their inevitable daily place on the drawing-room tea-table, but being borne along out of doors, by the flower beds, beneath the trees, then the sense of the unusual, the topsy-turvy sense, the party-giving sense, swept me. As Rivage came by he gave me the smile — a smile at once discreet, polite, and friendly — that an old butler gives to a little girl of the family. I turned and watched the three men passing from the dazzling brightness of the lawn into a leaf-dimmed gravel path, and listened to the retreating flap . . . flap . . . of the table. This, I thought, is really living ! And on the wave of this exhilaration I tore to the house.

.

An hour later Gerry and I stood waiting outside Evergreen Arbour for our guests. All at once in the afternoon stillness intermittent voices were heard on the other side of the shrubbery.

“ They’re coming ! ” said Gerry. .

A hat was seen perking up above the laurel

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leaves, then another . . . another . . . and then the whole party appeared round the corner. Everyone began saying "how-d'you-do" very enthusiastically. My pleasure at their doing the right thing was a trifle nipped by the thought that this how-d'you-doing was really a little silly as we had, of course, all met at luncheon. However, Aunt Flora's sudden cries that the urn would boil over in a moment if we weren't careful struck such an 'accustomed note that instantly everything became real again.

This, my first experience as hostess taught me a great deal. It taught me the extreme difficulty of trying to entertain fourteen people in a minute space, the discomfort to a very large man of being placed on a very small stool, the necessity of practising beforehand a dance one was going to do in the exact place where one was going to do it. During the actual tea I could not help noticing, though my mind fought against noticing, that the grown-ups did not seem to be enjoying themselves so tremendously as they were meant to do. They were all being as nice as they could possibly be, but, knowing them as I did, I now and again observed signs . . . signs. . . . At one moment

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it even shot across my mind that really and truly they would have enjoyed their tea more if, instead of being crammed shoulder to shoulder in the shrubbery, they had been sitting at their ease in the drawing-room as usual : but the thought was so lacerating that I strangled it on the spot.

Tea over, my dance was called for, and at that instant Gerry and I realized for the first time that till all the tea-tables were taken away there would be no space for me to dance in. The men-servants were far away across those hot lawns ; also, at this moment, they would be having their own tea. But, “ Oh, if *that's* all ! ” exclaimed Mr. Ridford, seizing on plates and tables. Everyone sprang up to help, and, oddly enough, thinking of it afterwards it was really those few moments when everyone was charging up and down our narrow, clinker-edged path dumping the tables and tea-things on the lawn to the accompaniment of Aunt Flora's cries, warnings, and instructions, it was really those few moments that were definitely fun.

“ *Now* then, Dolly ! ” said Uncle Reggie, when everyone was pressed together tighter

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than ever so as to leave a space for me, "Now then!" Everyone clapped. I started off . . . *rattle of tambourine . . . chassée, spring, point toe . . . bang of tambourine on head, bang on knee . . . side kick and turn . . . rattle, rattle . . . swirl . . . rattle . . .* but oh! the smallness of that hut when one came to dance in it! I was brought up short every moment by the right wall, the left wall, the back wall. And as for the slipperiness of trying to dance on taut sacking! Hardly had I made all these disconcerting discoveries when Vic, completely thrown off her balance by my tambourine, broke into hysterical, maniacal barking. Everyone turned to silence her, to soothe her, but she would be neither silenced nor soothed. Noise to the Hilldrop family was only second as subject for condemnation to sunlight. Till Vic was quelled no one was going so much as to look at my dancing. I stopped. I was nearly in tears. But Vic would not stop. "Here," said a male cousin at last, "I'll take her back." He picked her up, and as her protests grew fainter with distance Mr. Ridford began to clap frantically. "*Encore, encore!*" he shouted, and I saw that he was stamping with his feet, but

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as he was stamping on sacking over earth it made no sound. I had never been to a concert, and for a moment I was at a loss. "Encore?" I queried.

"Yes, *encore*! . . . again, start again Dolly."

I brightened up. "Oh! shall I start again, from the beginning?"

"Yes, yes!" cried everyone.

Rattle . . . chassée, spring, point toe . . . bang on head, bang on knee . . . side kick and turn . . . rattle, rattle . . . twirl . . . rattle . . . whirl . . . twirl . . . rattle, rattle . . .

I stood breathless, receiving applause. And then a miraculous thing happened. Mr. Ridford, his face radiant, was standing in front of me holding out a huge bouquet.

"For *me* . . . ?" I gasped.

He bowed. "Yes, for you, with congratulations!"

"Oh!" I said, clasping it to me. I had no idea what I ought to say or to do. The whole thing seemed too strange, too extraordinary even to say thank you. I merely stood there hiding my embarrassed face in the

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roses, the verbenas, the sweet-peas, and the
mignonette of Mr. Ridford's bouquet.

"I think, dears," said Uncle Reggie that evening, sitting at the head of the dinner-table, his fair face pale above the dark blue of his hunt coat, "I think, dears, we *all* think, your party was a great success."

As I smiled back at him down the table I tingled with pleasure; for I was at that age when I believed that for anyone to say a thing proved that it was true.

4

On one of those afternoons when Gerry was at work with Mr. Ridford I was chasing Vic round the great oriental plane-tree at one corner of the house, when I saw two or three of the more elderly grown-ups come out for a stroll on the terrace. I stood and watched the dark-clothed figures wobbling slowly along, wraps hanging over arm — they had, as I knew, been out for a drive on the coach — ends of neck-scarves floating, one with a tight-rolled

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umbrella with which, as she walked, she struck the flag-stones sharply at each step. Now one of them had come to a standstill, pointing out something in the valley to the others, who stopped too, nodding and exclaiming. The umbrella-owner made jabs with this umbrella at the horizon beyond the valley. Now they were perambulating on again . . . slowly . . . slowly. "Oh," I thought, "how *can* they waste their lives like that! When I'm grown-up I shall go on being just as I am now," and, slick and lithe, I was over the haw-haw in a moment and had flung myself on my face in the grass beneath to look for frogs. But frogs were scarce that afternoon, and in a few moments, impelled by some new idea, I was in the house and running up the stairs. When I came to the first-floor landing where was Aunt Maud's room through an archway to the left, I happened to glance through this archway, and there, propped against the wall, opposite her door I saw a large brown-paper parcel. At the sight I stopped. Aunt Maud had promised to give Gerry and me two new campstools for Evergreen Arbour, campstools that would be entirely our own, and ever since she had told

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us they had been ordered we had been watching for their arrival. Now, after a moment's thought, I approached this parcel. I knelt before it: By its general appearance it certainly suggested campstools; but experience had taught me that the outside of a parcel often suggests an object which on one's opening the parcel is not to be found inside. It struck me that if I made a small hole in the brown paper the problem whether this particular parcel contained campstools or not would be solved. I poked my finger through the paper. I put my eye to the hole, but my eye met darkness. Obviously the hole must be made bigger. I inserted my finger and ripped the paper sideways and downwards. The sight of a segment of whitish wood and a little piece of green-and-orange-striped canvas confirmed my hopes. Enchanted, I scrambled up, off my knees. It seemed a pity, I thought, giving a parting glance at the jagged paper as I ran off, that what before had been such a tidy parcel should now be such an untidy one, but in any case it would have to be undone in an hour or two, so it didn't much matter. I felt I simply must go and tell Mrs. Turner this latest campstool

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news. I rushed into her room, and found her sitting in her armchair doing nothing. That was how I liked to find grown-ups when I had something to tell them; if they were doing nothing there was a chance of their listening properly. I told her of my discovery. Never in my life had I been so surprised as I was at Mrs. Turner's reception of it. Her reclining position became an upright one. What to me had seemed a simple common-sense action was revealed to my horrified ears as a social misdemeanour of the gravest character. This outrage to Mrs. Turner's sense of correctness whipped the usually calm waters of her mind into a veritable whirlpool in which I, the now tearful victim, was tossed this way and that. In her flow of denunciation I saw myself a little girl who did not know what's what, a young lady who was a disgrace to her upbringing, a child with whom it was not safe that other children should mix for fear their manners would become corrupted: in a word, I was a social outcast.

One of the chief aims of my upbringing had been to impregnate me with a sense of sin. This had been done so effectually that even a

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hint of reproof was enough to throw me off my balance . . . and now . . . at Hilldrop . . . before my beloved Aunt Maud, to have committed this horror !

“ Oh Mrs. Turner,” I sobbed ‘ at the end of her tirade, “ what can I *do* ? What can I *do* ? ”

“ You must go to her Ladyship,” said Mrs. Turner solemnly, “ and you must *beg* her to forgive you. You must say how very, very, *very* sorry you are, and that never, never, *never* will you do such a thing again.”

Finally, seeing me as completely shattered as she considered I ought to be, Mrs. Turner softened slightly and said that my crime should be a locked secret between us.

“ Oh, thank you, thank you. . . . ”

However, I can’t help thinking it did leak out ; very probably Mrs. Turner in the real goodness of her heart had herself interceded for me before my own confession, for when, the very skin of my body feeling the shame, I stood before Aunt Maud and stammered out my apology, trying hard in my confusion to remember to say ‘ very ’ and ‘ never ’ three times each according to instructions, a smile,

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an extremely amused smile which she tried to hide but couldn't, spread over her face as she said, "Oh, never mind, dear, it really doesn't matter."

The surprise ! The relief !

5

Several weeks before the Hilldrop school-treat which took place every August, parcels of small naked dolls would arrive from the toy shop in the nearest town. The aunts and grown-up cousins would then set to work to dress them with scraps of stuff. Their maids undertook to cover the dolls' lower limbs with white drawers and petticoat, and if any relation or guest was staying at Hilldrop who was new to this doll-dressing the story would be told yet again of how a maid of my great-grandmother had once unwittingly made dozens of dolls' petticoats from a piece of the rarest old Mechlin lace that she had found in a box of odds and ends.

Gradually as the grown-ups worked away in the Cabinet room at the dolls a competitive

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spirit would arise among them. One cousin in particular would take an all-but naked doll up to her room over-night, and would enter the dining-room the next morning at breakfast holding her now fully dressed doll aloft, "See what I've done!" she would cry exultantly.

The day before the treat three trestles would be put close to the library window. On one of these would be placed the whole collection of dolls; on another rows and rows of toys, and on the third more grown-up presents for the older children. Every time one passed through the library it gave one a flicker of excitement to see it all disarranged in this fashion, a quiver of delight at the knowledge of what all this disarrangement portended.

Very soon after luncheon on the day itself Gerry and I would scuttle upstairs to the Red dressing-room that looked over the drive, for from here could be seen the first sign of the children. Just under the window was a table, and on to this we would scramble. Mrs. Turner, almost as strung-up as we were, would stand behind us. Before us lay the drive, the great white gate at the end, now fixed expectantly open, then more drive, and trees. It was

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on this further strip of drive that our eyes were riveted.

“There they are!” Mrs. Turner would cry suddenly, “look, there’s one of their banners!”

Yes, flecks of bright colours of banner, and, now flecks of light colours of children’s dresses were clearly there where before there had been nothing but road and trees. The excitement in the Red dressing-room increased. A few moments more and we could not only see but hear what was coming. Continuous chattering, chattering. An endless serpent of children was coming towards us, barred every few yards by a banner. Why they had these banners at all, and what was on them I don’t know, but there they were, banners of bright-coloured stuffs, the grander ones with fringes, stretched out on two poles held each by a child. These banners were a constant concern to the teachers, who could be seen running to and fro by the side of the children, like sheep-dogs with their flock. By the time the front part of the procession had got half way down the drive — the air, now filled with the children’s shrilling voices, for they all appeared to be talking

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without a pause and as loudly as they possibly could — by this time one had definitely the feeling *the school treat has begun!* Tumbling down from the table, Gerry and I would tear from the room, down the stairs, out to the quadrangle, and then to the drive to see the very first children arrive. Upstairs it had been as if we were looking at a picture of marching children, but standing by the side of the drive as they unrolled by us, these dozens and dozens of children, child after child, chattering face after chattering face, passing so closely by one, filling one's eye, pressing into one's mind, gave one the oddest feeling. They appeared so overpoweringly real. Contact with this river of new life seemed in some obscure way to make one become more intensely alive oneself.

The park was to be the afternoon's play-room. As each block of children arrived their conversation rose to fever pitch. What was it all about? What was it they all had to say to each other that had to be said so rapidly, so violently, and so repeatedly? Each year after the school-treat this problem was discussed at the Hildrop dinner-table but never solved.

But now the children were running about

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everywhere, hurling themselves down on the long dank grass, screaming, jumping in the air, or rolling down the park slope. At first Gerry and I stood looking on while this rush of hilarity eddied round us, but very shortly we were swept into the vortex; generally by yells of grief over a bruise or a sprain, a lost hair-ribbon or lost relation, with which disasters the children became afflicted before ten minutes had elapsed. To say nothing of the discoverers of wasp-nests. These wasp-nests, like the children's chatter, were a mystery. Up till the day of the treat no nests had been known, but hardly had the treat begun before the children had discovered the wasps and the wasps had discovered the children with, needless to say, disastrous results. Past school-treats had taught me that blue bag, sympathy, and a seat in the shade were the proper things to offer a wasp victim.

Before I came down to Hilldrop, I had bought eighteen little cardboard-bound books of children's stories for the school-treat. The covers of these little books, which had cost me several weeks' pocket money, were one of one colour, one of another, all in the most

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entrancing shades. At Hilldrop I had put them in a row on my mantelpiece, and almost every day I would rearrange them, trying new colours against each other. Now, the school treat well under way, I ran up to my room to fetch them. The mantelpiece looked very bare when I had taken off it all those little bright-coloured squares. It gave me a pang : but go they must. As I ran downstairs again I decided to have a scramble for them. The children always liked that. I arrived back in the park breathless. This was the moment I had waited for ever since the books had caught my eye in Bumpus's window. The girls, so I decided, should have them : I thought they would appreciate those lovely covers more than the boys. I saw under the chestnut tree a group of girls of various sizes who had been playing some game, and had just flung themselves down on the grass. They would do splendidly. "Aren't these little story books rather nice?" I asked, going up to them, "would you like to have a scramble for them?" "Oh yes, Miss!" they cried and all the cotton dresses leapt up. What fun to be organizing something oneself! The girls stood near me in a crowd; in the front an

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undersized child with a hare lip and a black hair-ribbon. "Now then you must stand back," I admonished, "and I will throw the books." They all came closer, hands outheld. "No, you must go farther back," I protested, trying to speak authoritatively as I had heard the grown-ups do. "Yes, Miss," they said, but did not budge. I backed away myself. For a moment I could not decide which of my darling books to throw first. . . . "Now then!" I cried, and hurled the yellow one. Instantly there was a scream. It had struck the hare-lipped child in the face. She fell back sobbing into the arms of her friends, and a chorus of shocked protest arose. "Ow, Miss, ow could yer?" "And 'er so small too!" "Ow, Miss!" "And Elsie 'as lost her auntie only a week back!" This reference to her aunt started off the others, who began to vie with each other in crying out all the past disasters in Elsie's life: she had broken a front tooth: her class teacher wasn't fair to her: she had once been in hospital eleven months: her kitten had been run over: she always cried over arithmetic: she had not been able to come to last year's school-treat, and now

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this, this final blow of fate, had been delivered by my hand. "Ow, Miss, it's too bad, that it is!"

"Oh, I *am* so sorry . . . I'm so *dreadfully* sorry," I stammered, "I never, never . . ." then, seeing the weeping Elsie led off by a supporter I quickly drew out the mauve book — the yellow one had already been seized on — and made to run after her, "perhaps this will comfort her!"

"Ow, *no*, Miss!" came a voice reproachfully, "not as after what 'as 'appened it wouldn't!"

"Just *give* 'em to us Miss," said an older girl encouragingly, "don't throw 'em. That's dangerous, that is!" A good idea. They closed round me. The Elsie disaster had drawn the attention of other children. My group was now double the size it had been, and over the heads of those round me I could see others running towards us.

"Here!" I said hopefully, and held out the orange book.

"Ow! that's pretty that is! Here, let me have it!" cried a girl.

"No! *me! me!*" A dozen hands grabbed

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at it, those behind me jostled to get in front. I was nearly knocked over. "Careful!" I cried, and held out the emerald one. The struggle for it was worse. "Oh! don't tear it!" I implored as two girls seized on it at once. Indignant voices were coming from behind. "This way, Miss, this way! Don't give 'em all over there!" The turmoil grew worse every moment. I was hemmed in on every side with hands, faces, faces, hands; hands all outstretched, faces all screaming "*Me, Miss! Me . . . me . . . !*" Fresh children were constantly joining us, pushing to get in front, elbowing and shoving, and joining in those ceaseless cries of "*Me! . . . me! . . .*"

We had become one swaying mass of which I was the centre. Panic was rushing through every part of my body. I tried to give out the books, but by now I was jammed so tightly I couldn't move my arms. "Please keep back . . . please, *please* keep back," I called out, or, rather, tried to call out, but in the din my voice made not a sound. Some quite big boys had joined us at the back, yelling with laughter as they tried to fight their way in. . . . And then suddenly, above their heads, I saw Mr.

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Ridford . . . I had never heard him, nor anyone else, shout so loudly. He gripped one boy by the neck with one hand, and another boy with the other hand : " Stand back all of you ! " he roared. As if by a miracle the children fell silent, and began to back away. " They get a bit excited," he said apologetically as he reached my side, seeming almost ashamed of the children's behaviour, as if in some way he was responsible. I had noticed before, so anxious was he that everything should go right for everyone, that if it didn't he always seemed to think he was to blame.

" Shall I throw those things for you ? " he asked. I nodded gratefully. Taking the books he flung them one by one, yards away, all in different directions, the children hurling themselves after them. Now why hadn't I thought of that ? I was filled with surprise at my own stupidity. But still more surprising was the sudden change over from a panic situation to ordinary life. Only a second ago I had been in the midst of that suffocating surround of children, and now, here I was standing by the tutor's side, he smiling down at me, I smiling back at him, and, lying outspread before us,

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the park just as usual: the tufted grass, the leafy tree branches with little pieces of sky glinting through them, groups of playing children here, there, and everywhere; the casual, happy, school-treat afternoon in full swing. I was bewildered by something in these rapidly alternating situations, by something I couldn't quite grasp. But Mr. Ridford was speaking. "I've been looking for you," he was saying, "I thought perhaps you'd help me with the boys' races . . . I want someone to hold the other end of the tape."

"I'd *love* to!"

While holding the tape taut between Mr. Ridford and myself, my eye on the racing figures pounding towards us, my thoughts were occupied, not with the fact that this time I had indeed been 'saved' by Mr. Ridford, but in wondering how the grown-ups would label the experience I had just been through. To myself it had been scarifying, but, supposing I served it up conversationally at dinner to-night, what sort of reception would it get? Would it be looked on as an amusing incident or a disgraceful one? Should I be sympathized with or laughed at? Regarded as a heroine or a

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dunce? At this time I had a great desire to join in any talk going on around me, but this year, just before coming down to Hilldrop, a special conversational effort on my part had been so disastrous that it had made me extremely apprehensive. I had overheard someone use the expression 'gone to the dogs.' I asked what it meant. Once in possession of this fascinating idiom I kept it carefully in mind, longing for a suitable opportunity to whip it out. A week or two later, when I was one day at luncheon with my parents, my mother happened to mention that she had heard some peculiar stories of the doings of her lately dismissed maid. Here, if ever, was my opportunity! "I suppose," I said airily, as I sprinkled my stewed plums liberally with sugar, "I suppose Payton has gone to the dogs!"

The outburst of anger from my father and of protests from my mother had not only filled me with astonishment and shame, but made me realize the concealed traps that lie in wait for the would-be conversationalist.

Now, as I stood in the grass of the Hilldrop park, this lacerating memory stirred in my mind.

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No: on the whole the book-scramble had better not be mentioned.

At four o'clock the cry went up: "Tea! . . . tea!" It was extraordinary how titillating that cry of 'tea' sounded at the school-treat. As if some blissful, most rare event were about to take place.

Now the figures of Rivage and the footmen mingling with figures of housemaids and kitchen-maids were seen moving about within the shade made by the great beech-trees near the servants' wing. All these figures were in agitation. To and fro they ran from house to park, from park to house, bearing heaped-up trays and all the hot-water cans, large and small, that Hilldrop possessed. When the long trestles under the trees had had alternate plates of cake and bread-and-butter placed all down their centre, and the children were scrambling onto the wooden benches, then was the moment for Gerry and myself. Each snatching up a small hot-water can from the collection put ready under a tree, we held them out open to Rivage and his enormous can. Smiling with

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benevolence, like a god pouring out gifts from a cornucopia, Rivage poured forth the boiling tea. However many Hilldrop school-treats I might attend I could never get over the strangeness of seeing tea come bounding, a brown and steaming rope, out of the spout of a hot-water can. From big can to little can, from little can to thick white mug, from white mug to draining mouth, such was the route of these gallons and gallons of tea. Every single member of the Hilldrop party, all the Hilldrop maids, all the school teachers helped direct the course of this river. Even when one would have thought each child must be full of tea from head to foot the cry of "More tea please, Miss!" still rose in the air. Charging round the long, sun-mottled trestles, water-can in hand to get it refilled, one would meet now one, now another, of one's co-workers — the second housemaid, one of the gardeners, Aunt Flora's maid with her pince-nez and her neat smile. It was odd and amusing to meet them all like this, at this sylvan meal.

When at last the children's powers of eating and drinking had failed them, and they were again hurling themselves about on the grass,

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pommelling each other and screaming — when this moment arrived the Hilldrop party and the teachers had tea in the dining-room. The ladies of the party sat at the table, the men stood round, and started by helping us, but, after a time, they forgot and only helped themselves. After the scrambling clatter of the children's tea, this dining-room meal in the half-light of the drawn blinds seemed strangely quiet and suppressed. The chatter of the children seemed to have drained off all power of chatter from the teachers, and at first, as the tea-cups were passed round, there was hardly any sound but that of hushed voices thanking each other. There was tremendous politeness over handing the cream jug. Gradually a little conversation started in one part or another of the room, appeared to be going to flourish, got quite cheerful . . . and then thinned to nothing.

The teacher on my left was small, with light freckles, and a flowery dress. I liked her and would have made friends if I had known how, but I did not know how, so we sat in silence. She had her own special way of eating. She picked her cake up off her plate with the tips of her fingers, took a careful bite, and then put

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it down again in an aloof and thoughtful manner as if in some way it had offended her. I was impressed by this, and out of the corners of my eyes watched with interest this protracted demolition of her cake.

At the end of tea she fixed her gaze on the Wouverman over the mantelpiece. I too looked up at it, at the white horse whose great Flemish flanks and streaming tail presided at every Hilldrop meal.

"That's a nice picture!" suddenly burst from her explosively.

"Yes, isn't it! I *do* like horses, don't you?" (Quite a conversation!)

She gave me a fierce look. "Never had anything to do with them," she shot out angrily, and then seizing her tea-cup, which was all but empty, gulped down the little brown puddle.

Silence fell on us. "*I have offended her,*" I thought; "how dreadful — but *how*?" My mind shot about like a confused rabbit. "Odd," I thought, ignorant of what extreme shyness will do to people, "odd that anyone so small should be so fierce."

But the plump, bespectacled teacher on my

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right had turned towards me. "We ought to be going," she said in a worried way, "there are the others."

My mind walked round and round this observation, trying to find some handle to take hold of. It was one of those regular grown-up remarks that left one completely at a loss.

"*Oh!*" I said at last.

"One doesn't want to be selfish," she went on.

"No . . ." I said vaguely, and then, feeling the sentence ought to be longer, I added, "of course not."

"*Well, then . . . ?*"

Suddenly I remembered that the teachers were to have their tea in two groups, half of them staying with the children while the others came indoors. *Now* I realized what the plump teacher was at. She wanted me, as niece of the house, to take the matter into my own hands, and lead the tea-party back to the park. The gulf between what she wished me to do and what it was in my power to do left me gasping. *I break up the tea-party! I lift up my voice to direct the family's comings and goings!*

The plump teacher was still searching my

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face. "*One must not be selfish,*" she repeated, and this time there was a note of reproof in her voice.

"No . . ." I said still more feebly, and stared at the crumbs on my plate. A slight sound came from between the teacher's teeth as if she were going to begin again, but at that instant there was a movement all round the table. Everyone was getting up. "Extraordinary! She'll think that in some way I've managed it!" I thought delightedly. "A sort of magic! I must remember to tell this to Gerry!"

At quite the end of the school-treat there came the bun and present giving. Once more cajoled into their ranks, the youthful legion wound from the park-gate on to the terrace so as to pass the window where Aunt Maud handed out the toys. It was fun to stand by the monster baskets of buns at the gate holding out bun after bun to each passing child. Great fun at first, then rather less fun, then no fun at all, and finally it was a deliverance when a grown-up voice remarked: "I expect you've

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had enough of this by now, haven't you? Wouldn't you rather go and help with the toys?" One really would rather, and thank you very much, and one was off in a moment.

Running into the library one at once savoured almost the best of the upside-down school-treat-day feelings. It was like being in a shop, only here one was oneself behind the counter instead of in front, and in this Arcadian world one gave away the goods instead of selling them, handing the toys over the low window-sill to the continuous procession of children. The whole scene — ourselves by the toy-laden trestles inside, the terrace and lawn crowded with children and teachers outside, the beautiful stone jars at the back of the lawn behind them, and beyond that again the great vista of park and valley, of giant trees and vast tranquil sky — the whole picture vaguely, nostalgically, reminded me of something: something that I had perhaps known in a picture, or read, or seen on the stage at the few theatres I had been taken to? I could not say.

No sooner had I reached Aunt Maud's side at the window than, just outside, I saw the freckled teacher's flower-patterned dress. She

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was standing marshalling the children as they came by to take their presents, and trying to make them decide which toy they really wanted. At sight of her I went scarlet: but then it struck me that perhaps in some way, by taking special trouble over the presents, I should be able to make up to her for having hurt her feelings at tea. At this moment she saw me.

“Hullo!” she said in the most friendly manner. (*Then she’s forgiven me!*) “Come to help with the toys? That’s nice!” After which she turned away as if embarrassed, and I saw her profile redden. (*Did even grown-ups then feel embarrassed sometimes?*) I was as astounded at the discovery as I was puzzled as to whatever she could be embarrassed about. But it was very satisfactory to be friends again, for friends by the end of the toy-giving we became.

Then, last of all, came the final ushering of the children into their ranks, and the long winding away of them up the drive. It was just the same as their arrival, only the other way round, and now, instead of talking they were singing. At first, when they were close to us, this singing was some of it squealy and some of it bawly; but as they got further off it

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sounded better. When they were right down the drive, the last cotton frock disappearing into the green of tree and shrub, their singing still came to us, but now so thin and far-off that it sounded almost piteous, as if somewhere in the distance were a number of lost kittens. These departing children seemed to be bearing away the summer day with them, the summer day and all the school-treat fun . . . it was all over now . . . all over for a whole year . . . but there was no time to feel melancholy about it, for Gerry and I had already turned back to the house for a last run through the whole length of the rooms before the double doors were shut. For on the school-treat day, as on engine day, every door was flung wide, and one could see room after room, from billiard room at one end to Circular room at the other. It was irresistible to hurl oneself into that vista, to feel the carpeted floor of one room after another disappearing under one's racing feet. It was amusing too when one met a relation patting up a crushed cushion in one room, or a footman coming in with a tray in another, and one all but ran into them but never did quite, because one's balance was so certain,

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one's flying feet so swift, that one never actually touched anything or anyone.

There was a languorous end-of-the-party feeling everywhere : little bits of coloured paper and empty cardboard boxes scattering lawn and park outside, bare toy-trestles inside, furniture all awry, a curious sense of emptiness where before had been fulness ; footmen on every side hurrying in and out, lifting, carrying, pushing, rearranging, appearing and disappearing through the doors. But even this wrong-side-up part of the school-treat, all the thought-out delights of the afternoon turned into nothing but these torn bits of paper and this general untidiness, even all this end-of-the-day dishevelment had its charm if you knew what to do with it, and that was, to rush through it again and again as hard as you could ; then you whipped up all this vacuousness into something that in an odd, subdued way held an element of excitement.

6

On ordinary Hilldrop days the time between tea and dinner, with the low light slanting

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through the tree branches in the park, was as delectable as any other part of the day. The only occasions when I didn't like it were when, towards the end of our visit, and the days drawing in, Aunt Flora would act show-man to the sunset. That was dreadful.

• Crossing the hall, I would see her peering through the glass of the terrace-door while at the same time keeping a sharp look-out for anyone passing by within the house, so as to urge them to come and reinforce her enthusiasm. Inevitably I would get caught. Everything seemed to get the wrong way round and to become miserably embarrassing when Aunt Flora stood there by the terrace door demanding admiration for her sunset.

“Yes, beautiful, Aunt Flora,” I would say because I had been taught to be polite, taught, when a grown-up said anything was beautiful, to acquiesce, but in my heart hating this flaming wreckage of the day's reassuring blue sky.

“You don't sound very enthusiastic, dear,” Aunt Flora would murmur, disappointed in her proselyte, then, catching sight of my mother coming down the stairs, “Here, dear!” she would cry, “such a *lovely* sunset . . . you must

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come and look at it . . . did you ever *see* such colours ! ” And then, realizing I was about to slip away, “ No, dear, *don’t* go yet, it’s changing every minute — you really oughtn’t to miss it . . . oh ! look at that long streak of yellow by the green ! ” And in her excitement she would drub on the glass with her fingers as if, could she only reach the sunset, she would like to pat it in approbation.

In that passionate but dissolving sky all that Hilldrop stood for seemed to be dissolving too, diminishing, collapsing, falling to pieces. This gathering gloom, this sense of inevitable coming darkness were passing from the sky to me, filling me with a sense of creeping apprehension. . . . Now the crimson lake, the gamboge, the pale jade and lemon were fading and paling. . . . The intense quietude was surreptitiously sucking me into itself. I felt powerless against it, powerless against the way it was reminding me of all I wanted not to remember, for already there had collected in my mind a number of things I would prefer to forget. Behind my halcyon Hilldrop life there always lurked the knowledge that the day would inevitably come when I should be taken back to London.

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There would inevitably come the moment when, opening the schoolroom door, I would see that dreary little room, see the bullfinch in its cage hanging silhouetted in the window against the grimed backs of the houses in the next street, and I would think "Back again! *It's all over.*" And there would press into me the realization that the dismalness of my home life had me again in its claws.

With every nerve now I resisted the sunset, resisted being swept into its dying passion. I longed to protest, to cry out against what it was doing to me, instead of which, my upbringing constraining me strong as harness, I heard myself saying yet again, "Yes, Aunt Flora, isn't it lovely!" and despised myself for my humbug.

Now everything was growing darker. The solemn hush of the sky was absorbing the valley, the lawn, ourselves, the hall where we stood, the whole of Hilldrop. Oh! this gathering darkness, this intense quiet, this sense of creeping loneliness, what was it stirring in me . . . reminding me of? If only Frederick would come pushing through the swing door with his stool to light the gas

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and . . . oh, relief ! There actually at this very moment was the sound of his wooden stool bumping against the other side of the baize door, and here he was marching into the hall in his matter-of-fact way which in itself was as welcome as if it had been a blast of trumpets. No sunset nonsense, no sentimental fal-de-lal about Frederick ! There he was, carrying his stool in one hand and a lighted taper in the other, placing his stool in the centre of the hall beneath the gas chandelier, climbing on to his stool, gingerly applying taper beneath gas globe . . . pop of gas . . . five more globes, five more pops, and Frederick's work of salvation was complete. Light, reassuring, insistent light, flooded the hall and every object within it, and in this effulgence all the clockwork of normal Hilldrop life was set in motion again, given back to me.

One disciplined taper had defeated Aunt Flora and her sunset.

PART V

EVENING AT HILLDROU

EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING. ESCAPED from the hands of my mother's maid, newly washed and dressed, I would feel, as again, as in the morning, I ran down the passage and stairs, that this was the beginning of another, but smaller and different day: the Hilldrop evening day, the little end-of-the-day day that held its own special glow.

Now I was in the drawing-room standing about in my party-frock and silk stockings watching the grown-ups gradually collecting, the aunts and women cousins looking in their various coloured dresses like a flock of pale-hued human butterflies that the heat of the day had brought to birth at this evening hour.

Mr. Ridford was generally opposite me at dinner, and watching what he ate and trying to hear what he said was in itself an occupation. It was a regret to me that he definitely did not

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look as well in his evening clothes as he did in his flannels. In spite of his solidity, in the evening he had a fly-away look, not the smooth, absolutely sleek-coated appearance of the men of the family ; also, amongst their maroon, pallid, or brownish faces, his looked a trifle too cheerfully coloured. " All the same," I would protest loyally to myself, noticing these differences and wishing that I didn't; " all the same he is superb ! " ' Superb ' was a new word I had just discovered, and across the dinner table I mutely made a present of it to Mr. Ridford. .

At dinner Gerry and I always sat next each other, and no sooner had we sat down than we started the water-bottle game. As I look back on it how peculiar, how pointless, it seems ; but at the time how fraught with excitement and whispered plots. Most of one's child-pleasures one can understand, but the mainspring of this one is lost to me. As far as the actual object went, it was to collect round us and drain to the dregs as many of the glass water-bottles as possible, and, the table being long, there were any number of these bottles of an unique and a particularly lovely design. We had of course

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at first to profess an abnormal thirst so as to make our constant demands for more water plausible. This subterfuge lasted for the first course or two, but after that more subtlety was required. When we noticed any two people much preoccupied with conversation one of us would lean across the table to emit a casual, "Would you give me the water, please?" that would not draw attention to the row of empty bottles already in front of us. Also Frederick, most amiable of footmen, constituting himself our accomplice, would go wheeling round the table to retrieve any bottle that had escaped from our collection. The supreme moments of the game were when Aunt Flora, for instance, needing some more water, would look up and down the table in a puzzled way and exclaim, "Where *have* all the water-bottles got to?" And another voice would chime in, "Yes . . . very odd . . . I can't see *one*!" At such moments our minds were adazzle with delight.

When, after dinner, we were all collected in the drawing-room among the orchids that fantastically displayed themselves on every table beneath the rays of the little lamps, then my dearest wish was that Aunt Maud would

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sing. Usually, before this happened, some other members of the family sang or played. Aunt Flora would sit down to her harp and . . . thrip . . . thrip . . . would go her long white fingers on the tautened strings. I found this thrip-thripping a thin and bloodless affair, and for me the only charm in the performance was when, with a louder but deadened thrip, one of her harp strings snapped.

“Ah!” my great-grandmother would exclaim, lifting up both her hands in the air, and then letting them fall flop into her lap, “there’s another of poor Flora’s strings gone!”

But when Aunt Maud got up from the sofa and sat down at the piano, her wild-rose fairness lit by the candles on either side, then, with the greatest circumspection, I would creep away to a long sofa against the wall at the far end of the room, above which a monster palm outspread its green fingers. Here I was nearly hidden by the palm’s big brass pot. The palm’s earthenware pot stuck up above the brass one, and, to conceal this fact, an oriental scarf of pale pink sprinkled with little stars of silver had been tied round it. Praying that no one had noticed this secluding of myself from the

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family group I would sit there on the sofa, my eyes on the brown-banded green stem of the palm, on the pink scarf, its silver touches picked out by a near-by lamp. There would come the opening chords of Aunt Maud's song . . . I shut my eyes . . . now her voice was afloat in the air . . . winging about the room like a bird. The gentle melancholy, the sweet nostalgic sentiment of her songs was honey to my crude being. As I listened my spirit seemed to dissolve, to dissolve and yet at the same time to be aching, straining towards I knew not what . . . but even this aching was itself delight. I was swept into some exquisite experience, some adventure of the mind . . . a sadness that was a new kind of joy. Now my spirit was caught up, tossed in the air . . . now soothed, rocked . . . unknown voices whispered to me . . . whisperings of such lovely import that they outran all words. . . .

I heard a movement in the room. I opened my eyes. Oh! dreadful . . . Uncle Reggie had got loose! He was no longer sitting in his chair as everyone should sit while this enchantment filled the room, but was fidgeting about ;

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and I knew only too well where this fidgeting would finally lead him. With mouse-like shiftings on my sofa I tried to keep the brass pot between his eye and my body . . . useless . . . there was his saffron-moustached face, his amused eyes peering at me round the palm. Dearly as I loved him I stiffened with the longing for him to go away . . . with the longing for him not to speak . . . above all not to speak. As I sat there alone something had been happening to me, and I wanted it to go on happening without comment.

"Well, Dolly," quizzically, "and what are *you* doing here?" We were far enough off for his low voice not to be heard at the piano end of the room.

"Listening to the singing, Uncle Reggie."

"Well, so are we all, but why d'you sit over here all by yourself?"

"I don't know, Uncle Reggie."

"You *don't know*!" softly laughing.

"Come along," coaxingly, "come and sit with the others."

"No thank you very much."

"*No thank you very much*! You are a funny little girl, aren't you?"

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“ I daresay, Uncle Reggie ! ”

The last note of Aunt Maud’s song had just sounded. Uncle Reggie went back to the others. “ Dolly *daresays* she is a very funny little girl,” he laughed, flinging himself down in his arm-chair.

I clenched my hands to control the jar I felt all over my body. Uncle Reggie’s jocularities had taken from me something precious. Why, because one was a child, was one always to be treated as a joke ? In the ordinary way I was quite ready to accept the cap and bells — but not when the air was filled with the rising and falling of wings. Then it was different.

2

But on Sunday evenings Aunt Maud did not sing. On Sunday evening my great-grandmother demanded hymns. I enjoyed these evenings. It was fun to see who chose which hymn ; for the rule was that each member of the family should choose in succession.

As I stood in my usual place by the piano,

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the beautiful Adam room lay spread out before me. The silk-shaded lamps threw a subdued light on to the ceiling where drifted white-limbed goddesses reclining on clouds, clouds brought into being by Angelica Kauffmann, different from those that floated above the downs, but, in their own way, even more emotional and spectacular. In the centre of the ceiling hung a crystal chandelier whose thousand facets had once glittered in a boudoir of Marie Antoinette; while, at the further end of the room, within curved alcoves on each side of the mahogany doors, two nude marble figures held their eternal poses of grace.

Everywhere I looked, sunk in armchairs, seated in a row on the sofa, or standing in front of the great looking-glass over the mantelpiece — whose depths often mirrored back a masculine hand straightening an evening tie — here on every side, known, intimate, closely interwoven with my own being, were gathered the family, duplicated now in the mirrors on the doors and in the long pier-glasses between the curtained windows.

I savoured to the full this all-around-me family feeling, it acted as a pleasant spring-

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board for my excursions into the heavenly spheres induced by the hymns, and, most especially, induced by my self-chosen hymn — hymn number two hundred and eighty-nine. For, to the' puzzlement, and, as I now realize, the intense dislike of the grown-ups, this was the hymn I invariably demanded.

*Days and moments quickly flying
Blend the living with the dead ;
Soon will you and I be lying.
Each within our narrow bed.*

Such was my choice. A morbid child. Not at all, merely logical. Everything I had been told of the next world — a place to which, so I understood, I was inevitably on my way — sounded to me charming, infinitely pleasanter than my earth life which, except for a few months a year at Hilldrop, meant my London life. Not that I had ever again thought of expediting my progress in that direction : that thought had come and gone, never to return. All the same the heaven-world, a place, according to children's hymns, chiefly turquoise colour, where the sun always shone, where everyone was always kind and always gay,

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sounded to me the most desirable place possible. Taken one day by my governess to the National Gallery, I had seen a painting that still further encouraged me in thinking the next world preferable to this. 'This was Botticini's *Assumption of the Virgin*. The whole spirit and atmosphere of this picture entranced me, Those rows of charming angels, so serene and debonair, brooch on shoulder,* and hand on hip, perched so airily on their cloud-formed seats as if at some heavenly picnic — here were paint and canvas saying the same thing as did the hymns. And there was a yet more potent reason for my longing for those heavenly pastures. One day in church the phrase fell on my ears, "There shall be no night there." Then in Heaven there was *no night*? That decided me.

"And what hymn do you choose, Dolly?"

"Number two hundred and eighty-nine please, Aunt Flora."

For a moment there would be a pregnant silence. Since I had been allowed to sit up after dinner hymn number two hundred and eighty-nine had become only too well known in the Hilddrop drawing-room. Then, "Wouldn't

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“you rather, dear child,” my great-grandmother would say, “have something a little more cheerful?”

“No thank you, Granny.”

I knew I could not be denied my hymn. I knew it was not approved by the grown-ups, but their approval and disapproval were always drawn from sources far beyond my comprehension. If they had told me that the heavenly prospect which seemed to me so alluring depressed them in the extreme, I would certainly not have inflicted my hymn on them; but they could not for very shame explain to me that their views on leaving this solid earth were far different from my own. So now, filled with happiest anticipation, my eyes on the pendant crystals of Marie Antoinette’s chandelier, I sang with all the childish passion of which I was capable, “Days and moments quickly fly . . . y . . . ing, Blend the living with the dead. . . .”

In between joyful thoughts on the world to come I derived much amusement from surreptitiously shoving Gerry sideways, or, equally, from being shoved by him, down a narrow passage made by the length of the grand piano

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and the window alongside. Fixed in the shutters of this window was a burglar-alarm, a bell at the end of a springy piece of steel. If one brushed against the curtains of this window in a certain way the bell would softly begin to sound its warning note. In a word there were infinite possibilities in the situation to anyone who knew how to manage it properly.

3

Then there was the evening, the supreme evening when Miss Witherington played the piano. Miss Witherington had been music teacher to Aunt Maud and Aunt Flora. "Dear Miss Witherington," Aunt Flora would say, "a most brilliant player! Or, as she herself would say, *executionist*. I hope, dear, that some day you may have the opportunity of hearing her."

I never heard this wish expressed without feeling unreasoning hostility to Miss Witherington. Also I could not help noticing that though Aunt Flora spoke of her music teacher with respect she seemed to find the thought of her queerly oppressive.

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There came a day when Miss Witherington announced that she would like to stay a night at Hilldrop on her way back to London from Bath where she was going to attend a concert. "So now, dear," said Aunt Flora with satisfaction, "you will hear her play!"

"Who's that coming?" asked Uncle Reggie.

"Miss Witherington, dear."

Gerry turned to me. "Sounds as if she's a bit withered," he muttered. My mind pranced. Witherington was a name rich in possibilities, a name that lent itself to much display of school-boy humour, and up to the day of her arrival the Witherington joke went shamelessly, gloriously on.

"The Witherington will be with us to-day!" remarked Gerry as we helped ourselves to the hot dishes at breakfast the day of her arrival.

"A withering day!" I retorted, and, delighted with my own wit, gave myself a larger helping of kedgerie than I had intended.

"A *withering* day, dear?" caught up Aunt Flora as she whisked by, "but it's a perfectly *lovely* day!"

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“Oh! you don’t know!” I sniggered, “it’s the most withering day there’s ever been!”

“Withering day!” my Uncle took up, “what an extraordinary expression! Where do you children get such odd words from?”

The time of Miss Witherington’s arrival being doubtful, we were all sitting round the tea-table in the drawing-room, tea being just over, when Rivage opened the doors and announced her. A plump, very self-assured lady fanning herself vigorously with a programme swam in after him. Everyone got up, and with many greetings and pushing aside of chairs Miss Witherington was encouraged to the sofa, and placed by the side of Aunt Maud. Fresh tea was ordered. The heat of the concert at Bath was Miss Witherington’s first topic, and, whatever else was talked about, she kept going back to it, and, whenever she did this she snatched at the programme on her knees and fanned herself afresh: “Oh! the heat at that concert! Oh! the heat!” On the left side of her black dress, transparent at the top, and trimmed here and there with little dabs of orange velvet, there was pinned a pair of gold

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pince-nez. Whenever she took them off her nose — and she put them on and took them off constantly while referring to details in the programme — whenever she did this, they would shoot back into place with a spring. She had not been in the room for five minutes before these back-springing pince-nez had become to Gerry and myself, surreptitiously catching each other's eye, one of the most treasured details of Miss Witherington's personality. The Bath concert dealt with and finished, she turned to her own performance, to which we were to be treated after dinner. The piano and the acoustics of the room were enquired into: then, her tea finished, she wished to try the height of the piano stool, to run her hands up and down the keys, to be reassured as to the light, to know where her hearers were to be placed, and, as for the brocade cover thrown over the end of the piano and the photograph frames that stood on it: "Please, please . . . if you don't mind . . . yes, *all* of them, dear Flora . . . it would be impossible, quite, quite impossible . . . I know you will understand . . . Oh! let me help you!" "But of course, dear, of *course*," cried

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Aunt Flora, going rather pink in the face, and scrambling the things off the piano, "but of course, when *you* play . . . !"

When the final guardsman in his silver frame had been swept aside, the lid of the piano was raised. In fact quite usual and necessary preparations for a piano recital were made, but to Gerry and myself, who had never even seen the piano lid propped open before, all these arrangements appeared extraordinary. Inevitably in our minds they were added to the absurdity of the mechanical pince-nez.

Dinner was over, and Miss Witherington, with Aunt Flora acting as aide-de-camp, was preparing to play. Standing imposingly in her dress of purple lace by the side of the keyboard, Miss Witherington began to direct and rearrange the positions of her listeners. "My dear Maud, I advise you not to sit quite so close . . . and you, dear Reggie, on the contrary, are really a *leetle* far off, are you not?"

Gerry sidled up to me. He was biting his underlip. "We'd better get out of this," he

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muttered, "or I shall explode." We slipped through the open doors into the Cabinet room. Here we could hear without being seen. The voice in the drawing-room was asking for the windows to be shut as she felt a draught. "I am sure on an occasion like this everyone will gladly put up with any slight inconvenience they may experience." Gerry and I flung ourselves, one on the floor and one on the sofa, and each seizing a cushion we smothered our laughter in their depths. There was a moment's silence in the next room, and then, "May I ask for complete — but *complete* silence!" I rammed my face further into the pleated silk.

Miss Witherington began to play.

Neither Gerry nor I had ever heard professional playing before. Nothing in the family musical evenings at Hilldrop, with their easy rocking or plangent hymn tunes, their gentle melodies and songs of sentiment, had prepared us for the volume or the arrangement of sound that now burst on our astonished ears, and neither of us having any real musical understanding Miss Witherington's virtuosity merely struck us as the most ridiculous exhibition possible. Those sudden muscular assaults on

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the keys: those dramatic and unexpected pauses: those crashings in the bass: those flippancies in the treble — they were all so much fodder for our mirth. Our laughter-shaken bodies rolled this way and that, we only lifted our faces from our cushions to grimace at each other or mutely to mimic Miss Witherington at the piano. It was disgraceful, but it was irresistible.

With a final crash Miss Witherington's playing came to a conclusion. As the drawing-room applause and gratitude died down Mr. Ridford came tiptoeing in. He had no doubt overheard peculiar sounds issuing from the Cabinet room, and had come to warn us to be careful. As he caught sight of our flung-down figures each clasping a cushion, Miss Witherington's voice came through the doorway asking the drawing-room, "Would you perhaps wish me to continue?" And at these pompous and conceited tones Mr. Ridford's face too became suddenly convulsed; with the utmost alacrity he shot over to the hearth rug, and seizing his handkerchief crammed it over his mouth.

Miss Witherington was again applying her-

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self with all her trained energy to the keys, this time playing a succession of short pieces, introducing each with suitable remarks, or else, the piece concluded, asking, rather sharply, if her rendering of certain passages had been noticed. None of these observations escaped Gerry's mute mimicry, and within a few moments Mr. Ridford was as much putty in his hands as I was. Here, in the tutor, was a fellow-conspirator, here was an audience for Gerry and myself! If we had tried to egg each other on before we tried still harder now. Again and again from his place on the hearthrug Mr. Ridford would gasp out, "Now . . . really . . . you two . . . now . . . really!" and then, as he buried his face in his handkerchief, his shoulders would heave. Pomposity in purple lace had flung wide to Gerry and me the Bacchanalian gates of hilarity, and Mr. Ridford, stripped of his maturity, had been swept in with us. He was our victim, our triumph, our proof that though in the next room they were taking Miss Witherington seriously she was in reality the most absurd creature ever created, and that Gerry and I were the two people in the house who, had

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discovered it. The fact that the world of lunatic mirth we three had entered was a suppressed and secret world, a world of suffocated laughter and soundless miming, added to its enchantment. Never in my ten years of life had I known such a feeling of escape, of ecstatic rebirth. Every inhibition was knocked down like a ninepin. Gone, sunk out of sight, out of memory, fears, restrictions, repressions. Joy like runnels of light was pouring through me. My spirit danced on a cloud. As for Mr. Ridford, he did not succumb without a struggle. Voice now completely gone, face buried in handkerchief, he would flap one of his hands at us in a weak, an altogether gone-to-pieces effort to down us, a last pitiful display of his sense of duty as tutor to tutored. But it was no use. Gerry and I had him fast in our harlequin world of laughter, that world of flashing radiance which we had both created and discovered.

4

Lying on my back, I stretched my feet down in bed and turned my toes upwards so as to

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feel the taut pull of the sheet against them, and on the instant my limbs were sheathed in content. Within this slight body, lying at once fixed and relaxed in lovely ease, lightly, lightly, my spirit floated. I smiled to myself in the darkness because I was thinking that though this day was over, I was still at Hilldrop; safely there for weeks to come. A long vista of garlanded hours lay before me. Hilldrop! The very name spelt all the sweetness of living. The double, and to me enormous, bed in which I lay impressed on me, as compared with my own bed at home, that I was most happily not at home. I was amusedly aware of my own smallness as I slithered about between those cool slippery sheets. No other sheets ever seemed to me so deliciously slippery as the Hilldrop ones, and if their raised, enormous monogram did at times get in the way of one's chin it was, after all, a reminder of where one was.

The warm summer night lay over the sill; shadowy dimness filled the room. On the mantelpiece a night-light within a pink shade glimmered like a mystic rose. No night terrors here! Already Gerry's and Mrs. Turner's

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rooms contained their comforting presences, Mrs. Turner's door indulgently left ajar for the benefit of small, nervous visitors. I could hear her now softly, cautiously, moving about her room. There was something very dear in these stealthy movements, knowing as I did that all this precaution was for fear of disturbing me. And now one of the most soothing of sounds was coming through her open door, that of scissors cutting into a piece of stuff laid on a wooden table. For a little while this subtle sound enchanted my ear, and then there was silence. I was too completely content in mind and body even to make the effort to turn on my side to go to sleep. Between the flowered cretonne curtains, not quite drawn together, I could see the night sky across the valley opening and shutting with summer lightning . . . there it was again . . . so strangely, so silently, opening . . . shutting. Drowsily I lay watching that far-off quiver between the long curtains. And now the tremolo hoot of an owl from the trees in the park, aloofly cool in the warm stuffiness of the night . . . further off now . . . and now further still, coming from the wood, from

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• within the smooth, the moon-drenched leaves.
 . . . And, then, without warning . . . like a
 soundless fountain . . . sleep showered over
 me. 4